



PHD

Appeasing the Mushroom Gods

A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Magic Mushroom Users' Constructions of Meanings Surrounding Psilocybin Mushroom Use

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Appeasing The Mushroom Gods:

A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Magic
Mushroom Users' Constructions of Meanings
Surrounding Psilocybin Mushroom Use.

James Malcolm Thompson

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Psychology

April 2014

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Abstract

Magic mushrooms, more than any other psychoactive substance, are steeped in mythology. Since their (re)discovery by the West in the mid-20th Century they have been constructed as spiritual sacraments, recreational drugs, psychological tools and gateways to metaphysical realities (Letcher 2007). Each of these conceptions represents multiple and competing discourses which constitute magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. In this thesis I address how these multiple and competing discourses are utilised and negotiated by people who consume magic mushrooms in the contemporary social world. Data was generated for this study through active interviews, combining narrative and semi-structured styles, which were conducted in person, via Skype and by telephone. Twenty three participants (7 female, 16 male; aged 19-60) were recruited to the study representing varied styles and frequencies of magic mushroom use; from psychedelic enthusiast 'psychonauts' to more casual poly-drug users.

Using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis I explore the discourses participants mobilised and negotiated in constructing accounts of the meanings surrounding magic mushrooms. Analysis focused upon three key aspects of magic mushrooms, their use and the experiences they occasion: '*what magic mushrooms do*'; how participants conceptualised the ways they 'alter reality', '*what magic mushrooms are*'; 'natural' drugs or beings with agency, and '*what magic mushrooms are for*'; recreation or spiritual improvement. In addition I explore the relationships between discourses; how magic mushroom users construct new and complex understandings by negotiating, wrestling, and playing with available discourses, to make sense of experiences which often appear ineffable and bizarre. In exploring these discourses and the relationships between them, participants constructed magic mushrooms in three broad ways: as '*just drugs*' as '*drugs of distinction*' and as '*neo-shamanic sacraments*'. I discuss these ways of conceptualising magic mushrooms in light of the dominant neo-liberal order and the limited potential of magic mushrooms to provide a counter-cultural alternative.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Mushrooms and Multiple Meanings: Rationale for Researching the Constructions of Magic Mushrooms and the Experiences they Occasion

Fungi that contain the psychoactive compound psilocybin have not acquired the epithet of ‘magic mushrooms’ for no reason. They can occasion experiences which alter a person’s sense of perceived reality in profound ways, potentially having a lasting impact upon those who consume them. Magic mushrooms have the potential to challenge the dominant discourses of rational subjectivity and consensus worldview, occasioning experiences of altered consciousness far beyond the range of ‘normal’ waking consciousness as it is conceptualised in late-capitalist Western societies. As such, people have to attempt to make sense of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion.

Over the past 60 years attempts to conceptualise magic mushrooms (and the psychoactive chemicals within them) have been made by a broad spectrum of society, including research scientists, psychotherapists, medical professionals, politicians, legislative bodies, theologians, bohemians, psychonauts and people looking for a good time (Letcher 2006). This has resulted in their being variously constructed as mystical sacraments, novel research chemicals, psychotherapeutic tools, potential weapons, creativity enhancers, recreational substances, dangerous drugs, agents of social change and gateways to metaphysical realities (Letcher 2007, Stafford 1992). Such an array of conceptions makes the available discursive and social resources for constructing the meanings of magic mushrooms diverse, leaving users to make sense of the substance and their experiences through competing and contradictory social understandings.

This thesis is an empirical exploration of the ways in which people who consume magic mushrooms discursively construct the meanings of magic mushrooms, the experiences they occasion, and their use in the contemporary social world of Britain in the 2010s. This research is timely and pertinent for a number of reasons. Firstly, magic mushrooms are scheduled as a Class A substance in Britain subsequent to enjoying a brief period of legal tolerance and open sale from 2002 to 2005 (Walsh 2006). With the advent of the Drugs Act 2005, those wanting to continue to consume magic mushrooms saw themselves rendered criminal overnight and their supply of easily purchasable psilocybin mushrooms ceased (Letcher 2006). Despite this change in legislation magic mushrooms have not disappeared and people still seek mushrooms and consume them for a wide variety of reasons. Whilst research has previously been conducted with magic mushroom users in Europe it has predominantly occurred during periods of legal tolerance and sale, with associated widespread availability of cultivated mushrooms (e.g. Riley & Blackman 2008, Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010, Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiou, & Zoll 2009). The present thesis seeks to

develop research which explores the meanings made of magic mushrooms by users, by conducting a contemporary empirical study with current users who have to negotiate different constructions of mushroom use at a time when they are a scheduled substance which is harder to obtain (Walsh 2006).

The focus upon magic mushroom users' constructions of meaning is also timely given the current 'psychedelic renaissance' occurring in the natural sciences (Sessa 2008). Human laboratory research using psilocybin (the key psychoactive ingredient in mushrooms) has resumed in Britain for the first time in nearly 50 years (Carhart-Harris et al 2011, 2012), which is part of an ongoing international reappraisal of psychedelic substances as potential medicines and aids to neurological research. This 'renaissance' is dominated by laboratory studies with synthetic psilocybin and an associated epistemological focus upon psychopharmacology and neurological materialism (Langlitz 2010). Psychedelics, perhaps more than any other class of substance, are greatly affected by non-pharmacological factors and how they are understood and experienced is heavily influenced by the cultural context of those consuming them (Furst 1976). The situated social, cultural, and historical factors which can shape how meanings are made of psilocybin mushrooms have largely been ignored and overlooked by psychopharmacology (Langlitz 2010), as have those who use magic mushrooms in the social world. The meanings that users construct of mushrooms and the experiences they occasion has generally been underexplored in empirical research. This thesis therefore seeks to address the social and cultural factors which influence how 'real world' magic mushroom use is made meaningful beyond the laboratory, by those who choose to consume them.

The study of magic mushroom users' accounts is also interesting due to the diverse ways the substance and associated experiences have been, and continue to be, conceptualised. Magic mushrooms can be conceptualised as recreational drugs and taken for fun, but they can also be conceptualised as 'entheogens' and taken to achieve mystical experiences (Letcher 2007). Mushrooms can be understood as pharmacologically active substances which occasion hallucinations through neurochemical action (Langlitz 2010), but they can also be understood as conscious spiritual beings which allow shamanic journeying to parallel dimensions (McKenna 1991). Irrespective of how they are conceptualised magic mushroom experiences act as a break from conventional consciousness. As such, how they are made sense of can provide insight into the negotiation of current understandings of what constitutes reality, the extents and limits of rational explanation, the negotiation or rejection of new forms of spirituality (e.g. neo-shamanism, Wallis 1999), as well as providing some indication of how this particular 'drug' and its use is legitimised and made meaningful. The findings of this study should therefore be of interest to critical drug researchers and critical social scientists interested in spirituality, constructions of legitimacy concerning drug use, social and cultural factors which affect the meaning of drug experiences

beyond the psychopharmacological, and the ways in which meaning is constructed of unusual experiences.

In subsequent chapters I shall explore how participants construct meanings of profound and challenging experiences brought about by consuming psychoactive fungi. Firstly, I shall offer some elaboration and clarification of these psychoactive fungi and their potential effects.

1.2 Psilocybin ‘Magic’ Mushrooms: Definition and Effects.

1.2.1 Varieties of Magic Mushrooms

‘Magic mushroom’ is a colloquial term applied to varieties of fungi which contain the psychoactive indole alkaloids psilocybin and psilocin (Hoffman et al 1959, Letcher 2006). At least 186 varieties of psilocybin mushrooms are known, comprised of 11 genres, the largest and most common of which is the genus *Psilocybe* (containing 117 species) (Stamets 1996). Psilocybin mushrooms have a wide global distribution, growing on almost every continent, with the highest concentration of species in Mesoamerica (Stamets 1996, Allen & Arthur 2005). In the UK the most common indigenous magic mushroom is *Psilocybe Semilanceata* known as the ‘Liberty Cap’. It is a small, light brown mushroom with a distinctive pointed cap, which blooms in the autumn and is found in pastureland across Great Britain (Letcher 2006). Liberty Caps contain a high and regular psilocybin content of 1% of the mushrooms mass (Stamets 1996). About 1-3.5g dried or 10-30g fresh mushrooms (20-40 individual mushrooms) are considered a moderate dose and in excess of 5g dried or 50g fresh mushrooms (60-100 or more mushrooms) comprise a large dose (Allen & Arthur 2005, Letcher 2006). Liberty Caps are picked in the autumn and users employ various methods for storage: typically drying the mushrooms, preserving them in honey and steeping them in alcoholic spirits such as vodka (Letcher 2006, Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Tairou, & Zoll 2009). Magic mushrooms are usually ingested orally and metabolism of the active ingredients occurs through digestion (Stafford 1992). Liberty Caps are often reported to have an aversive taste and can cause digestive discomfort when consumed (as can most varieties of magic mushrooms) (Stamets 1996, Letcher 2006). Mushrooms can be eaten in dried form, consumed fresh, or included in food stuffs or meals (Letcher 2006). Psilocybin can be extracted from the mushrooms by steeping them in hot water to produce a psilocybin rich tea and other tinctures can also be used to consume psilocybin, such as magic mushroom infused alcoholic spirits (Letcher 2006, Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Tairou, & Zoll 2009).

In addition to psilocybin mushrooms indigenous to the UK, varieties from abroad have also been imported, particularly during the period of legal tolerance and sale between 2002 and 2005 (Walsh 2006, Riley & Blackman 2008). Most commonly these are various subspecies of *Psilocybe Cubensis* which are large, fibrous, golden capped mushrooms that grow in the United States,

Mexico, East Asia and Australasia (Stamets 1996, Letcher 2006). Varieties of *Cubensis* mushrooms were the dominant commercial species during periods of legal sale due to the ease with which they can be cultivated from spores, their rapid growth rate and tendency to produce multiple blooms of mushrooms from a single planting (in contrast 'Liberty Caps' are notoriously difficult to cultivate) (Letcher 2006, Stafford 1992). The psilocybin content of *Cubensis* mushrooms is more variable than that of the 'Liberty Cap', with a maximum around 0.63% of the mushrooms mass although this can vary significantly between cultivated blooms of the same mushroom (Stamets 2005). Despite having a lower psilocybin content than Liberty Caps; their dense and large fruiting body and less aversive taste means *Cubensis* mushrooms are more easily consumed as a large dose and are often therefore assumed to be more potent (Letcher 2006). Similar species to *Cubensis* varieties such as *Psilocybe Bohemia* and *Psilocybe Azurensceus* are more potent (they contain higher concentrations of psilocybin), but are less commonly encountered (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011). Around 3g of dried or 20g of fresh *Cubensis* mushrooms is considered a moderate to high dose (depending on species this translates as between 1-2 large mushrooms), with more than 5g dried or 30g fresh (3 or more large mushrooms) known as a 'heroic' dose (McKenna 1991, Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011). *Cubensis* mushrooms are often known and marketed (both legally and illegally) by their assumed geographical location (e.g. as Thai or Mexican mushrooms) rather than by their subspecies taxonomy (e.g. *Psilocybe Mexicana*) (Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiou, & Zoll 2009). As well as being sold commercially during periods of legal tolerance, they can also be easily cultivated by users in home terrariums from spores (Letcher 2006, Walsh 2006).

A third key variety of magic mushroom pertinent to use in the UK is known as 'truffles' or 'philosopher's stones' (Pellegrini et al 2013). These are technically not mushrooms (the fruiting reproductive bodies of a fungus), but are a different fungal product: hard pieces of mycelium (sclerotia) rich in psilocybin and psilocin, which are produced by certain varieties of *Psilocybe* (e.g. *Psilocybe Atlantis*) during cultivation (Pellegrini et al 2013). Truffles contain comparable quantities of psilocybin to the fruiting bodies of the same *Cubensis* mushrooms (Gartz, Allen & Merlin 1994, Pellegrini et al 2013). They are consumed orally and occasion the same array of dose dependent effects and potential experiences as the fungal bodies of magic mushrooms (Gartz, Allen & Merlin 1994). Truffles have recently become more widespread throughout Europe due to their being legal to cultivate and sell in The Netherlands: Dutch drug legislation specifically bans the fruiting fungal bodies of psilocybin mushrooms, not this other fungal product (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011). As such, a burgeoning illegal trade to other countries in Europe has arisen through internet ordering and postal services (Pellegrini et al 2013). All fungal products categorised as 'magic mushrooms' share the presence of the psychoactive chemicals psilocybin and psilocin and I shall now provide an elaboration of these chemicals and their reported effects.

1.2.2 Psilocybin and Psilocin: Key Effects, Set & Setting, Tolerance and Addiction

Biologically the key psychoactive agents¹ within magic mushrooms are psilocybin and psilocin: tryptamine substances with a similar chemical structure to other ‘classical hallucinogens’ such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) (although psilocybin is less potent) and the endogenous neurotransmitter serotonin (Hoffman et al 1959, Passie et al 2002). When ingested the body metabolises and dephosphorates psilocybin into psilocin which crosses the blood brain barrier and selectively binds with high affinity to specific serotonin receptor subtypes, most notably the 5HT2A and 5HT2C receptors (Passie et al 2002, Vollenweider et al 1997). Although the mechanisms by which psilocybin works are not fully understood, it is believed that binding to certain receptors occasions certain specific ‘drug effects’. For example the 5HT2A receptor is thought to be instrumental in occasioning perceptual disturbances with psilocybin (Vollenweider et al 1997). If binding at this receptor site is blocked with a serotonin antagonist, psilocybin appears not to occasion perceptual disturbances or ‘hallucinations’ (Vollenweider et al 1998). More globally within the brain, psilocybin’s modulation of serotonergic pathways is understood to enact a functional deactivation of inhibitory neuro-circuitry, resulting in a state of ‘unconstrained cognition’ (Carhart-Harris et al 2012). Whilst psilocybin clearly exerts a profound neurobiological effect which can occasion certain potentialities for experience (Langlitz 2010), I shall argue throughout this thesis that neurobiology is but one aspect of magic mushroom experiences and the meaning that is made of them.

The subjective effects of magic mushrooms containing psilocybin and psilocin vary between persons but certain similar features are commonplace (Hasler, Grimberg, Benz, Huber & Vollenweider 2004, Riley & Blackman 2008). Dependent upon dose (larger doses produce more pronounced effects), magic mushrooms can occasion ‘trips’ which can last from onset, to peak, then decline to ‘normal’ consciousness from 2 to 12 hours (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011, Hasler et al 2004). The reported positive effects of magic mushrooms include euphoria, uncontrollable laughter, a sense of connection with others and with the natural world, altered perception (both visual and in other sensory modalities), visual disturbance, hallucination and somatosensory excitation (Riley & Blackman 2008, Hasler et al 2004). At higher doses these effects become more pronounced and users can also experience positive transcendent or mystical type experiences, a sense of ego dissolution (pleasurable loss of sense of self), feelings of oneness with the universe and of gaining new insight (Riley & Blackman 2008, Hasler et al 2004, Griffiths et al 2006). Reported negative experiences (‘bad trips’) include dysphoria, paranoia, anxiety,

¹ Many *Psilocybe* mushrooms also contain the chemical baeocystin. Although it is not a potent hallucinogen like psilocybin, it is mildly psychoactive and its role in the biological aspects of experiences with magic mushrooms is currently under researched and poorly understood (Letcher 2007).

delusion, fear of ego dissolution (negative loss of sense of self) and negative loss of reality (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011, Hasler et al 2004).

Some magic mushroom users and psychedelics writers also claim that psilocybin mushrooms can enable shamanic and animistic experiences: encounters with discarnate spirits and entities (e.g. ancestor and nature spirits, fractal metaphysical entities), communication with the mushroom itself as a conscious being and the journeying to, or perception of, parallel metaphysical realms (Letcher 2001, 2007, Luke 2008, McKenna 1991). Whether these experiences are understood to be in some way 'real' (McKenna 1991, Luke 2008) or elaborate hallucinations (Alushyn 2011, Shanon 2002a), is a matter of debate.

In terms of risks and dangers, psilocybin mushrooms are thought to be a relatively 'safe' substance, although in some rare cases they can aggravate existing psychiatric illnesses (notably psychosis), leave permanent alterations to perception and in a small minority of cases have potentially contributed to death by accident or misadventure (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011, Carhart-Harris & Nutt 2010). Magic mushrooms are thought to have no addictive potential as tolerance to psilocybin rapidly builds in persons with frequent exposure to the substance (Passie et al 2002, Hasler et al 2004). Despite the potential for negative experiences (the majority of which can be mitigated through talking down) and very rare adverse reactions, the academic consensus is that psilocybin is a relatively safe substance for human consumption, providing they are consumed in a safe and supportive environment (Hasler et al 2004, Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011, Carhart-Harris & Nutt 2010). This highlights an important feature of magic mushroom (and other psychedelic substance) experiences; they are greatly influenced by non-pharmacological factors. These are typically described as 'set' (the users' psychological state; e.g. their mood, expectations, and prior psychedelic experiences) and 'setting' (the social and environmental context in which the mushrooms are consumed; e.g. in a laboratory, at a party etc.) (Leary, Metzner & Allpert 1964, Zinberg 1984). Whether a 'trip' is positive or negative is largely thought to be a result of these factors and there can be great variability in an individual's responses to consuming magic mushrooms in different times and places, as a result of different set and settings (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011).

When considering magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion researchers typically attend to the biological action of psilocybin and the factors of set and setting. How these experiences are understood and made meaningful to the people consuming them, as well as how these understandings are shaped and influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors has, however, often been overlooked (Langlitz 2010, Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010). The present thesis seeks to attend to social, cultural and historical factors in the meaning making of magic

mushrooms and the experiences they occasion via contemporary empirical research. In establishing the rationale for this I shall briefly detail the history of magic mushrooms in the West.

1.3 The Magic Mushroom in Western History

1.3.1 'Ancient' History and Mushroom Myths: From the Neolithic to the 19th Century

The historical narrative regarding the (pre)history of magic mushroom use in Europe and Britain is a matter of debate. Writers such as Wasson (1971), McKenna (1992) and Devereux (1997) have proposed accounts of psilocybin mushroom use in prehistoric and pre-Christian times, linking the use of psilocybin mushrooms to religious rituals from the Stone Age, through the Classical world, and into the Medieval period. It has been speculated that psilocybin-containing mushrooms have played a significant role in the history of human spiritual development, awakening the religious impulse in the Palaeolithic and profoundly effecting the formation of religions through their use as a 'sacrament' (e.g. the mystery religions of Classical Greece, and Druidic cults of pre-Christian Britain) (Ruck, Hoffman & Celdran 2011, McKenna 1992, Letcher 2006). The 'ancient mushroom cult' (Letcher 2006) theory that psychoactive fungi have a long historical legacy in Western 'shamanic' consciousness has entered popular discourse, with mushroom users in the 21st century reproducing it in their accounts (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010).

However, Letcher (2006) argues that the narrative of ancient and historic mushroom use is contentious and he instead proposes a social constructionist reconsideration of magic mushrooms' role in Western history. He argues that archaeological sources allegedly depicting mushrooms (selected cave paintings, Dark Age and Medieval carvings, etc.) are not easily interpreted and that there is divergence of archaeological opinion about what is depicted. For example, the Hildesheim Cathedral door panel in Germany is interpreted by some writers as depicting psilocybin mushrooms and has been used as evidence of historical mushroom use in the West. However, other archaeologists interpret these carvings as stylised fig trees (Letcher 2006). Letcher argues that writers seeking to claim a historical use of magic mushrooms in Western civilisation may be biased when interpreting evidence. For example, McKenna (1992) based much of his belief in ancient mushroom cults upon his trip experiences and sought to find evidence to fit his theory. Letcher's argument is that the interpretation of magic mushroom experiences as serving a historical function in the West is a social construction. As such, it is inappropriate to presume that ancient culture and practices tally with modern cultural constructions of magic mushrooms and their use (Letcher 2006). This does not disprove the possibility of ancient mushroom use; instead Letcher's argument is that the evidence is too uncertain to draw any definitive conclusions.

What is known more conclusively is that prior to the mid-20th century, psilocybin mushrooms and their associated psychoactive effects were not considered desirable in Europe and North America

(Letcher 2006). Instead, they were conceptualised via a ‘pathological discourse’ (Letcher 2007) whereby ingestion of psilocybin mushrooms was considered a form of poisoning which received its own scientific classification of ‘*mycetismus cereбрalis*’ (Ford 1926). Surviving the ingestion of psilocybin containing mushrooms was considered a lucky escape from a dangerous error (Letcher 2007). Further evidence of this pathological conception of psilocybin mushrooms comes from published field guides to wild mushrooms (Letcher 2006). From the late-19th and into the early-20th century there was a boom in ‘mycology’ (the study of mushrooms), both as a scientific discipline and as a countryside pursuit (Letcher 2006). During this time numerous guides to field mushrooms were published; the majority of which either explicitly describe British psilocybin mushrooms as poisonous or omit details of them (Letcher 2006, 2007). It was not until the discovery of psilocybin mushroom use in Mesoamerica² in the mid-20th century, that the Western world ‘(re)discovered’ and reconceptualised magic mushrooms and their effects as intriguing or desirable (Letcher 2007). This reconceptualisation was primarily due to the ‘(re)discovery’ of magic mushrooms during a psychedelic zeitgeist. The isolation and synthesis of mescaline and LSD (substances with a similar array of effects to psilocybin mushrooms) had led to widespread interest in these novel substances as academic, therapeutic, and recreational tools (Metzner 2005, Letcher 2006).

1.3.2 ‘Rediscovery’ and Academic Interest: 1950s-1970s

The ‘discovery’ of magic mushroom use in Mesoamerica was a result of mid-20th century ethnobotanical³ expeditions fuelled by a debate surrounding the origin of *teonanactal*: a Mazatec religious sacrament described by 16th Century Franciscan Friars (Letcher 2006, Reidlinger 2005). *Teonanactal* was traditionally believed to be peyote: a psychoactive cactus from which mescaline is derived (Metzner 2005). However, after consulting with locals in Oxaca, Mexico, in 1938 ethnobotanist Blas Pablo Reko discovered it was a mushroom, which was still being used covertly as a divinatory tool (Letcher 2006, Reidlinger 2005). Reko and fellow ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes identified and collect specimens of the sacramental mushroom and published their findings the following year (Reidlinger 2005, Furst 1986). As a result of reading this paper an American amateur mycologist named R. Gordon Wasson, driven by a personal interest in ‘ethnomycology’ (the study of cultural uses of mushrooms) undertook an expedition to Mexico to discover more about *teonanactal* (Reidlinger 2005). This event changed the West’s relationship with ‘magic mushrooms’ forever (Letcher 2006).

² Where there is clear historical and anthropological evidence for the historic use of psilocybin mushrooms, see Metzner 2005.

³ Ethnobotany is the scientific study of the use and perception of plants in human societies, ethnomycology is a sub-discipline concerning the use and perception of fungi in human societies (Furst 1976, 1986).

During this expedition Wasson met the Oxaca *curandera* (wise woman) Maria Sabina in 1956 and he became one of the first Westerners to participate in a *velade* (healing ritual) which involved the ingestion of a large dose of psilocybin mushrooms (Reidlinger 2005, Letcher 2006). The following year Wasson detailed his experiences of intense religious and mind altering visions in a reverential article in *Life* magazine (Wasson 1957). This has largely been described as the first popularisation of the ‘sacred mushroom’ which drew the attention of the Western world (both academic and burgeoning counter-cultural) to the psychedelic and spiritual potential of the fungi (Reidlinger 2005). Wasson also brought back samples of *Psilocybe Mexicana*: the mushroom he ingested (Letcher 2006).

From the samples Wasson brought back, more mushrooms were cultivated and Albert Hoffman and his team of chemists were able to isolate and synthesise the psychoactive chemicals within the mushroom: psilocybin and psilocin (Hoffman et al 1959). Synthetic psilocybin was sold to research laboratories and psychotherapists across Europe and North America, and was added to the battery of psychedelic substances currently being deployed in research and therapy (Passie 2005, Metzner 2005). It was also liberally supplied to bohemians and artists of the time (Letcher 2006). The majority of academic research during this period concerning the experiences occasioned by psilocybin takes the form of experimental studies using synthetic psilocybin in pill form (I discuss this in detail in Chapter 2).

Concurrent with the academic and psychotherapeutic use of synthetic psilocybin throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s many interested parties from America journeyed to Mexico inspired by Wasson’s article. These included mycologists seeking to catalogue potential undiscovered mushrooms (Singer & Smith 1958), and more commonly ‘hippies’ questing to find a *curandera* and achieve the same mystical experience described by Wasson (Furst 1986, Reidlinger 2005, Letcher 2006). Among those seeking magic mushrooms was the psychologist Timothy Leary, who in 1960 had his first mushroom experience in Cuernavaca, Mexico, which he described as his ‘initiation’ (Leary 1969). As a result of his profound visionary experience Leary set up a psilocybin research team at Harvard University, known as the Harvard Psilocybin Project (Metzner 2005). For about a decade the active ingredient in pill form, rather than the mushrooms themselves, became the focus of both academic interest and high profile recreational use (Letcher 2006). Concern over the activities of Leary and his team at Harvard, coupled with rising fear of the burgeoning counter-culture in America and its association with psychedelic substances, eventually lead to the banning of psilocybin and psilocin in the USA in 1968, and then internationally in 1971 (Wark & Galliher 2010). This ended academic research with synthetic psilocybin for nearly 30 years (Sessa 2008). Magic mushrooms however, had been disregarded by the international legal machinery during this period, primarily because the discovery of indigenous species of psilocybin mushrooms in Europe and America had not yet been made (Letcher 2006).

1.3.3 Mycology and Mushrooming Comes to Britain: 1970s-1990s

During the late-1960s and into the 1970s, mycological expeditions continued into Mesoamerica, cataloguing more species of psilocybin mushroom and their use in indigenous contexts (Letcher 2006). Special mention must be made of the writer Carlos Castaneda because his 1968 book *The Teaching of Don Juan and the Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (and subsequent volumes), heavily popularised magic mushroom and hallucinogenic drug use, becoming a best-seller and appealing to the counter-cultural spiritual sensibilities of the time (Letcher 2006). Whilst Castaneda's account of his initiation in Yaqui shamanism and use of psychedelic plants has subsequently proven to be an elaborate fiction, his work was seen at the time (and still is by some enthusiasts) as factual and has been inspirational to many in their use of magic mushrooms (Hardman 2007) (see Chapter 2 for more detail about Castaneda and his legacy). More academically rigorous mycological expeditions were also conducted at this time. For example Pollock (1976a) provided detailed information on the taxonomy, habitat, and potency of a range of mushroom species in Mesoamerica, North America, and Australia. Pertinently he also described in detail his subjective reactions to them and the social circumstances surrounding his use. As well as persistent mycological research in South America, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, focus increasingly shifted towards psilocybin mushrooms indigenous to the United States and then Britain, precipitating increased use of magic mushrooms in the West (Letcher 2006).

Studies identifying North American psilocybin mushrooms began in 1975 (Weil 1975) as a result of University students and mycologists experimenting with previously unnamed psilocybin mushrooms as recreational drugs (Guzman & Ott 1976). Mushrooms were sampled based on their similarity to South American mushrooms in appearance and blueing reaction when bruised, encouraging formal cataloguing of new species (Guzman & Ott 1976). Subsequent popularising of mycological findings in America with details of how to identify mushrooms, their relative potency and habitat (Guzman, Ott, Boydston & Pollock 1976) contributed to the popularity of magic mushroom use in the USA in the mid-1970s. The dubious legal status that mushrooms occupied also aided this: mushrooms were only considered illegal if 'prepared'- dried or processed in some way (Letcher 2006). Mycologists continued to publish information about different available strains of mushrooms throughout the 1970s, expanding their focus from America to the rest of the world (e.g. Pollock 1976b describes the global distribution of *Psilocybe Semilanceata*) as well producing identification guides.

In Britain, mycological research had less of an impact on usage than it did in the USA. Mushrooms were a small part of the hippie underground movement from the late 1960s, but did not really become a mainstream phenomenon until the mid-1970s, due in part to the distance between the UK underground and academia, and the lack of any direct popularising efforts (Letcher 2006).

In 1976, however, tightening police powers regarding drugs and heightened media interest in drug related stories meant a test case for psilocybin possession was published in the British press (Walsh 2006). Significantly, the legal proceedings that followed the arrest of a man in Reading for possession of fresh psilocybin mushrooms, resulted in a judicial precedent that possession of fresh mushrooms was not the same as possession of psilocybin which had been banned since 1971 (Walsh 2006). However, legal wrangling continued over the status of mushrooms as a controlled substance throughout the 1970s and into the 1990s. Walsh (2006) suggests that prosecution or dismissal of a case depended on interpretation of the wording of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971; fresh mushrooms were not illegal, but if mushrooms had been 'prepared' or rendered a 'preparation' they became illegal. The interpretation of the word 'preparation' (and whether freezing, drying or powdering mushrooms rendered them a 'preparation') by the defence, prosecution and judge, determined whether a conviction was brought with as many cases being dismissed as prosecuted (see Walsh 2006 for a review of the case law concerning psilocybin mushroom possession in the UK).

After this initial successful case in 1976, mushrooms were deemed preferable to other psychedelics because of their legally ambiguous status in a time of increased police attention to drugs (notably LSD) (Letcher 2006, Roberts 2008). *New Scientist* magazine and the broadsheet press in Britain made accessible taxonomic and dosage details regarding mushrooms in their reporting on the fungus as a social phenomenon, and, after the 1977 drought a bumper crop of Liberty Caps grew nationally in 1978 (Letcher 2006). The use of psilocybin mushrooms became a rising social trend among the young from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, as evidenced by a number of medical case reports of young people being admitted to hospital in various parts of the UK due to mushroom ingestion (Hyde et al 1978, Harris & Evans 1981; see Chapter 2 for detail). This rise in use was partly informed by the link between free festivals (such as Stonehenge) and magic mushrooms. Between 1974 and 1984 the free festival scene and the emergence of New-Age Traveller lifestyles was a major political and social issue of that era (Hetherington 2000, Letcher 2006). Letcher (2006) points to the emergence of psychedelic bands (such as Gong and the Magic Mushroom Band) as well as the rise of neo-pagan eco protest spirituality as partly influenced by the emergence of magic mushrooms on the festival scene. Furthermore, festivals specific to mushroom use emerged, such as 'The Psilly Fair' in Aberystwyth, which started in the autumn 1977 and became an annual event which by 1980 attracted in excess of 800 people (Letcher 2006). Similar fairs sprung up around Cornwall and other parts of rural England during this period (Letcher 2006, Walsh 2006).

The then Conservative government took a dim view of the festival scene and the associated traveller lifestyle. Their denigration culminated in the Battle of the Bean Field 1985 where heavy handed police tactics were used to disperse the Stonehenge festival, and the subsequent introduction of the Public Order Act 1986 which rendered free festival gatherings illegal

(Hetherington 2000). Letcher (2006) argues that this is a contributing factor to making the upsurge in magic mushroom use a short lived phenomenon. He also argues that by the mid-1980s, dance, rave, acid-house and ecstasy had effectively replaced and marginalised the hippie culture of traditional free festivals and mushroom use, due to its broader appeal and the widespread year round availability of ecstasy.

During the late 1980s and 1990s mushroom use became a more peripheral activity in Britain (Walsh 2006, Letcher 2006). Although peripheral, in the early 1990s a new understanding of magic mushrooms was advanced by the ‘psychonaut in chief’ Terrence McKenna. McKenna espoused theories derived from his own ‘heroic dose’ mushroom trips regarding the power and potential of psilocybin mushrooms in his books *The Archaic Revival* (1991) and *Food of the Gods* (1992). In these he outlined his philosophy that magic mushrooms had a key role in the evolution of human language and consciousness, in the history of religion and in the future of human development (see Chapter 2 for more detail on McKenna’s philosophy). McKenna influenced another generation of people curious about psychedelics (famously the comedian Bill Hicks) with his lurid writing and advocacy of high dose mushroom consumption for meditative, consciousness expanding and shamanic purposes (Letcher 2006). McKenna’s books continue to be published in the present day.

1.3.4 Renaissance, Legality, and Legacy: late 1990s- to Present

By the 1990s magic mushroom use may have become a more marginal activity, but towards the end of the decade there was a resumption of human laboratory research using synthetic psilocybin in Switzerland, Germany and North America. Psilocybin research continues to be conducted, with the UK recently licensing psilocybin for human experimentation (Carhart-Harris et al 2011, Carhart-Harris et al 2012). This renewed research interest and relaxing of legal restrictions upon psilocybin as an experimental substance, has led some commentators to describe the last twenty years as a ‘psychedelic renaissance’ (Sessa 2008). A brief ‘renaissance’ in magic mushroom consumption in Britain also occurred in the early 2000s.

Between 2002 and 2005 in the UK there was a period of legal tolerance and sale of cultivated psilocybin mushrooms (Walsh 2006, Riley & Blackman 2008). This resulted from a ‘loophole’ being recognised in the wording of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971: ‘unprepared’ psilocybin mushrooms were not subject to legal classification, and subsequent case law had upheld this interpretation of the law (Walsh 2006). This ‘loophole’ in legislation existed due to the Misuse of Drugs Act being based upon the international UN Convention on the Misuse of Drugs (1971) which did not legally classify unprepared mushrooms at the bequest of countries such as Mexico

where they grow abundantly (Letcher 2006). In the late 1990s, Dutch ‘Smart Shop’⁴ owners had identified and exploited this gap in legislation and were openly selling ‘fresh’ cultivated psilocybin mushrooms in Amsterdam (Walsh 2006).

Based on the success of Dutch ‘Smart Shops’ the Camden Mushroom Company was established in 2002 and began to import cultivated mushrooms for sale in the UK within the bounds of the law (as supported by a 2002 government notice), so long as the psilocybin mushrooms sold were ‘fresh’ (Walsh 2006). Between 2002 and 2005, 400 establishments sold cultivated strains of magic mushrooms imported from The Netherlands or grown in the UK to the public, through shops, home delivery services, and barrow stalls at markets and music festivals (Walsh 2006). By 2004, the UK Revenue and Customs service estimated that between 8 and 16,000kg of psilocybin mushrooms had been imported (Walsh 2006), and official figures from the 2004/2005 British Crime Survey declared 337,000 people had taken mushrooms during that year (Roe 2005). The NME magazine declared Glastonbury 2004 the ‘third summer of love’ because of the abundance and use of magic mushrooms (Riley & Blackman 2008).

This period saw the widest use of magic mushrooms in Britain, largely because they became a highly available commodity which was legal to sell, buy and consume (Letcher 2006). However, this period ended abruptly when the Drugs Act was passed in 2005 which effectively banned all psilocybin-containing fungi and fungal products and criminalised the possession of fresh magic mushrooms (Walsh 2006). Notably, the situation from 2002 until 2005 was a confused one, with imports of mushrooms being subject to VAT as a legal substance, only then to be seized by police at the site of retail as an illicit drug (Walsh 2006). Legal cases at the time were thrown out on account of legal ambiguity: import and sale was condoned by taxation and Home Office notice, but police action often seized mushrooms at point of sale (Walsh 2006). The criminalisation of magic mushrooms resulting from the passing of the Drugs Act 2005 was highly controversial, since it was contrary to the evidence from harm minimisation surveys and empirical research using psilocybin as a discrete substance (CAM 2000, Hasler et al 2004). Both Letcher (2006) and Walsh (2006) note that the bill was rushed through parliament without significant debate during ‘wash up week’ in the run up to the 2005 general election where all outstanding bills must be passed or failed in seven days. As such, the authors argue that the banning of psilocybin mushrooms (and other associated restrictions contained within the act, such as the classification of the dissociative Ketamine as a Class A) may have been politically motivated, rather than an act of harm minimisation to protect public safety. Having reviewed the published research about the safety of psilocybin mushrooms as a saleable recreational substance for public consumption (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011), I am inclined to agree with these authors that criminalisation was politically motivated, potentially

⁴ ‘Smart Shops’ are establishments which sell legal ‘highs’, synthetic and herbal psychoactive substances and drugs paraphernalia. They are similar to ‘Head Shops’ found in the UK.

due to the political cache associated with conservatism in drug legislation and the potential lobbying power of the alcohol industry (see Measham 2004 for further discussion of the politics of drug legislation).

Since 2005, psilocybin, psilocin and all psilocybin-containing natural products are scheduled as Class A substances, the highest category scheduling for illegal substances, and prosecution for possession, cultivation, or sale may result in a custodial sentence (Walsh 2006). In 2008, The Netherlands followed the example of the UK and introduced legislation outlawing psilocybin mushrooms.

However, the wording of the Dutch Drugs Act was less wide-ranging than that of the UK, allowing for psilocybin rich sclerotia or 'truffles' to continue to be legally sold and consumed in The Netherlands (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011, Pellegrini et al 2013).

Since the criminalisation of magic mushrooms national self-report drug prevalence figures in the UK indicate a steady decline in mushroom use since its peak during the period of legal tolerance and open sale (2002-2005)⁵. The proportion of 16-59 year olds reporting use of mushrooms in the last year is down to 0.3% for the year 2012-2013 from a peak of 1.1% in the year 2004-2005. The same figures for 16-24 year olds are down to 0.6% from 3.0% during the end of the period of legal tolerance (2003-2006)⁶. This decline is likely due to the criminalisation of magic mushrooms under the Drugs Act 2005 which affectedly ended the open sale of fresh psilocybin mushrooms. Whilst it cannot be argued for certain that the huge reduction in availability has resulted in decreased prevalence, it is likely a significant factor (Hillebrand, Olszewski & Sedefov 2010).

Despite the change in legal status of psilocybin mushrooms they continue to grow in the UK, and cultivated mushrooms, mushroom spores and 'truffles' can still be obtained albeit illegally. Whilst the prevalence of magic mushroom use appears to be declining, there are still people who chose to use them for varied reasons and who construct a wide variety of potential understandings of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. The low prevalence of use may go some way towards explaining why magic mushrooms are a largely overlooked substance in critical drug studies, with very little research having been conducted into magic mushroom use, the meanings made of magic mushrooms, and the experiences they occasion since the period of legal tolerance

⁵ All figures taken from 'Extent trends in illicit drug use amongst adults: drug misuse 2012 to 2013'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tables-for-drug-misuse-findings-from-the-2012-to-2013-csew>

⁶ The peak in self-reported use for magic mushrooms for this age group occurred in 1998 (3.9%), the first year that Dutch Smart Shop owners recognised and publicised the 'loop-hole' in the UN Convention on the Misuse of Drugs 1971 (Walsh 2006). This is an aberrant year in the data set (the subsequent 3 year periods saw a decline followed by a rise in 2002) which precludes widespread legal availability, but is probably attributable to this initial increase in prevalence and interest, as well as increased contemporary law enforcement activity against other substances (e.g. ecstasy) (Letcher 2006).

ended in 2005. This thesis therefore allows for exploration of contemporary constructions of magic mushrooms post-criminalisation. Furthermore, the current psychopharmacological ‘psychedelic renaissance’ (Sessa 2008) utilising psilocybin demonstrates a renewed cultural interest in this substance, but one which overlooks the social and real world use of this substance. As such, the current thesis is a timely exploration of contemporary understandings of psilocybin mushrooms, and the social uses and construction of this substance is a relevant and valid area of research. In subsequent chapters I shall explore current users’ constructions of meanings of magic mushrooms in the contemporary social and cultural context, which is shaped in part by the historical narrative I have elaborated above.

This brief overview of the history of magic mushrooms in the West demonstrates that understandings of psilocybin mushrooms have changed across different historical periods. Whilst the mushrooms remain unchanged, the motivation to use them or not, what the experiences they may occasion are thought to mean or are for, and their legal status as a substance varies across different historical periods and between different social groups, organisations and institutions within a given historical period (Letcher 2007). The current thesis seeks to address contemporary constructions of the meanings made of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion, from the perspective of those who consume them. In order to do so, I constructed a research question and aims which guide this thesis.

1.4 Research Question and Aims

A deliberately broad research question was selected to allow for generation and exploration of a range of meanings and constructions offered by magic mushroom users. This decision was based upon the suggestion of previous research that multiple and competing cultural discourses surround psilocybin mushroom experiences (Letcher 2007), as well as broader sociocultural discourses of drugs and drug experiences which may influence users’ constructions and understandings (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010). As such, a question was designed which enabled the research to be conducted with a specific rationale (an exploration of constructed meanings of magic mushroom use), but which would also allow for exploration of a breadth of discursive constructions from participants. The research question is:

‘What do magic mushrooms mean to those who use them?’

In addition to this broad research question a number of aims were also generated with the intention of guiding the project. The aims of this research are:

- 1) To explore different meanings of magic mushrooms and their construction by users.
- 2) To explore the tensions between different ways in which experience/reality are constructed and understood by magic mushroom users.
- 3) To explore how understandings of magic mushroom experiences proposed by popular and academic literature are engaged with by magic mushroom users (specifically hedonistic, psychological, entheogenic, and animistic understandings).

The aims of the project are a deliberate mixture of broad and focused. The intention behind the first two broad aims is to enable exploratory research, attempting to produce a variety of constructions of magic mushroom use and its meaning from users. The third more focused aim is intended to allow an exploration of topic areas deemed by the relevant literatures to be significant in psilocybin mushroom experiences. As such, an effort has been made to allow participants to generate constructions themselves (an inductive or ‘bottom up’ approach), but also to explore topics selected by the researcher for discussion which may or may not be relevant to participants (a theoretical or ‘top down’ approach) (Braun & Clarke 2006). Lastly, it is hoped that exploration of the constructions of meanings of magic mushrooms in this thesis will facilitate broader understanding of the ways in which people negotiate different and competing social meanings of psychedelic drugs and experiences.

1.5 A Note on Terminology: Hallucinogen, Psychotomimetic, Psychedelic and Entheogen; Psychonaut, Consumer and User

The terminology surrounding psilocybin mushrooms (and drugs and drug use more generally) is politically charged and fraught with different meaning. Different words carry a history and serve to emphasise different aspects of how magic mushrooms have previously been constructed, positioning them in particular ways (Slattery 2008, Letcher 2007). As such, there is no ‘neutral’ terminology for describing or classifying psilocybin mushrooms, the experiences they occasion, or the people who use them (Letcher 2007, Slattery 2008). The class of plants and chemicals which magic mushrooms are associated with are variously described as *hallucinogens* (as occasioning hallucinations), *psychedelics* (as ‘mind-manifesting’ agents), *entheogens* (as sacraments to ‘awaken the divine within’), *psychotomimetics* (as mimicking psychosis) and *plant-teachers* (as spiritual shamanic entities) (Letcher 2007, Tupper 2008). Each of these terms serves to differently conceptualise magic mushrooms, mushroom users and the context of their use. Terms such as ‘*plant-teacher*’ and ‘*entheogen*’ carry specific associations of neo-shamanic use and spirituality; contrastingly terms such as ‘*psychotomimetic*’ and ‘*hallucinogen*’ are associated with psychiatric use, laboratory research and legal classification (Tupper 2008, Letcher 2007). Furthermore, terms

such as ‘substance’, ‘drug’ and ‘user’ can be contentious, carrying with them potentially negative notions of ‘abuse’ and ‘addiction’ (Rødner 2005, Slattery 2008).

In order to discuss magic mushrooms and those that ingest them without potential stigma, I have been selective in the terminology I use in this thesis. I predominantly use the term ‘psychedelic’ to describe magic mushrooms as a substance and the experiences they occasion due to its generality; other terms such as ‘entheogen’ and ‘hallucinogen’ are more specific in meaning and prioritise only one aspect of potential experiences with magic mushrooms (spiritual use and occasioning hallucinations respectively) (Letcher 2007, Slattery 2008). Whilst the term ‘psychedelic’ may emphasise the psychological properties of mushrooms as ‘mind manifesting’ (Stafford 1992), my general use of it is not meant to exclude other possible constructions of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. When I use the term in a technical capacity (e.g. detailing the 1960s research of Leary et al) I distinguish it from the more general use across the thesis.

I deploy the term ‘user’ for one who ingests mushrooms, though it is not intended in the pejorative sense of addict or abuser (Rødner 2005, Slattery 2008). I apply the term in the sense of ‘one who uses’, attempting to encapsulate the varied ways in which people use mushrooms (recreationally, for personal development, spiritual reasons, and to explore psychological and other worldly realities, etc.) which more specific terms may exclude. For example, ‘psychonaut’ (an explorer of the psyche) may be applicable to those who use magic mushrooms for spiritual and metaphysical exploration, but excludes those participants whose mushroom use may be more casual and recreational. Similarly, I have avoided the term ‘consumer’, as it is problematic due to affiliation with contemporary neo-liberal discourses where consumptive activity is associated with citizenship and personal identity (Riley, Morey & Griffin 2008). As the central question underpinning this research concerns the variability of meaning it is appropriate to consider the way terminology is deployed, and I would argue that the use of terminology is an important consideration in all critical drug research. I shall now provide an overview of the structure and chapters of the present thesis.

1.6 An Overview of this Thesis

Chapter 2 Literature Review considers existing research pertinent to the study of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. In this chapter I explore five separate literatures relevant to magic mushroom research; *psychopharmacological*, *psychedelic*, *auto-ethnographic*, *epidemiological* and *social* research approaches. In Chapter 3 Theoretical Considerations, I discuss the theoretical concepts I engage with and the epistemological issues of researching the meanings made of psilocybin mushrooms. In this chapter I critically examine the dominant theoretical position of ‘psychopharmacological realism’ in contemporary psilocybin research and posit an alternative epistemological orientation to studying magic mushrooms based upon social

constructionism. I also elaborate the theoretical framework of the current thesis: a Foucauldian-informed approach to discourse (incorporating ‘truth’, knowledge and power) and magic mushrooms. Chapter 4 Methodology, is where I detail and justify the rationale for the practical methodology used in undertaking the present study, including sampling and recruitment, ethics, the selection of interview methodology (face-to-face and the use of Skype and telephone methods) and analytic strategy. I also engage in reflexivity in this chapter, critically reflecting upon my role as researcher in the undertaking of this project.

Chapters 5 to 7 are the empirical chapters of data analysis and comprise the core of this thesis. Each chapter explores the discourses participants deployed in their constructions of the meanings of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. In Chapter 5 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Do’, I explore the discourses participants draw upon, negotiate and combine to construct the ways magic mushrooms alter perceived reality. This includes an exploration of how psychological discourse and parallel-reality discourse are negotiated and the issues of ‘truth’ and uncertainty surrounding experiences. Chapter 6 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Are’, concerns how participants deploy discourses to represent mushrooms as objects. In this chapter I address discourses of ‘naturalness’ and ‘spiritual agency’ which constitute magic mushrooms as objects of distinction, as well as constructions of ‘scepticism’ which challenge these discourses. Chapter 7 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Are For’, is where I explore representations of magic mushrooms as for ‘recreational’ or ‘spiritual’ purposes and the tension between these constructions. I also address an older and more troublesome construction of mushroom experiences as having intrinsic positive value, regardless of how they are used. Chapter 8 Discussion is the concluding chapter of this thesis, where the key findings are elaborated, the strengths and limitations of the thesis are discussed and recommendations are made for future research.

Having introduced magic mushrooms, briefly detailed their history in the West, and established the rationale and overview of this thesis, in the next chapter I shall provide a review of the relevant literature. This begins my exploration of the diverse ways that magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion have been understood, starting with the construction of magic mushrooms within academic disciplines and existing empirical research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The (re)discovery of psilocybin ‘magic’ mushrooms by the West in 1957 (Wasson 1957), marked the arrival of a new organic hallucinogen into a culture with limited but diverse frames of reference for making sense of magic mushrooms and the experiences they may occasion. Numerous parties from across the Western world took, and continue to take, an interest in conceptualising magic mushrooms: medical professionals, psychological researchers, psychedelic drug enthusiasts, theologians, counter-cultural thinkers, and legislators, to name but a few. As such, magic mushrooms more than most other drugs, have been and continue to be conceptualised in a variety of competing, contradictory and complementary ways, by official institutions, enthusiasts and researchers in both the physical and social sciences. Before considering the relevant research literature (or more accurately ‘literatures’) which have explored and investigated magic mushrooms and their effects, it is necessary to expand upon the various understandings of magic mushrooms which have arisen over the last 50 years, in order to contextualise research approaches.

2.1 Overview: Conceptualising the Magic Mushroom

Letcher (2007) provides an overview of these conceptualisations; he applies the Foucauldian concept of discourse (Foucault 1980) to the myriad ways in which magic mushrooms and their use have been categorised and constituted by disparate groups and institutions since their ‘(re)discovery’. His analysis identifies the broad ‘official discourses’ of the political and medical-scientific establishment, and the ‘resistive discourses’ generated by groups of users.

The ‘official discourses’ favoured by medical, legal and scientific bodies identified by Letcher are:

- a.) *Pathological* which constitutes mushrooms as ‘poisonous’ and the associated experiences they occasion as valueless.
- b.) *Psychological* which conceptualises psilocybin (the psychoactive chemical within magic mushrooms) as presenting opportunities for researchers to explore consciousness, further therapy, and deepen understandings of psychological functions.
- c.) *Prohibitionist* which categorises mushrooms as a damaging ‘drug of abuse’ that should be prohibited.

Contrastingly, the user generated ‘resistive’ discourses Letcher identifies include:

- 1.) *Recreational*, which constitutes magic mushrooms as ‘drugs’ for hedonistic use and pleasure.
- 2.) *Psychedelic*, which represents psilocybin mushrooms as a ‘mind manifesting’ substance taken for personal and creative growth.

3.) *Entheogenic*, where mushrooms are understood as a 'sacrament' to be used to occasion reverent spiritual experiences.

4.) *Animistic*, where mushrooms are understood to enable perception of and journeying to metaphysical dimensions, meetings with spiritual entities, and as possessing a spiritual intelligence of their own (Letcher 2007).

The interplay between these discourses and how they are taken up and negotiated enables certain understandings of the subjective effects of psilocybin mushrooms and their use to become predominant. This interplay is shaped by power: different discourses are used to make claims of legitimacy and authority regarding what mushroom experiences may mean and how magic mushrooms 'should' be used. Letcher (2007) contends that we currently live in a culture dominated by scientific materialism, which is hostile to understandings of phenomena which do not conform to this worldview. The majority of the discourses Letcher identifies operate within this contemporary scientific zeitgeist. For example, 'entheogenic discourse' which constitutes mushrooms as occasioning religious experiences can be divorced from theological concepts and be re-constituted as a psychological phenomenon ('mystical experience') using psychological discourse (e.g. Griffith et al 2006). Letcher (2007) argues that animist discourse alone sits outside the contemporary materialist 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980), since it constitutes mushrooms as providing access to typically hidden metaphysical realms and constructs beings or entities perceived when using mushrooms as things which exist independently of the mushroom user. This discourse (more than others) arises from users' subjective experiences and Western appropriation of indigenous knowledges, and challenges the predominant discourses which are shaped by scientific materialism. As such, it is frequently dismissed as 'mad' (Letcher 2007).

However, Letcher (2007) does not conduct a conventional discourse analysis. His application of Foucault's concept of discourse is to broad perceptions of how mushrooms are constructed from a varied range of data sources; mostly textual, but also experimental and notably anecdotal. In spite of this, he provides an invaluable 'conceptual map' of the broad ways that mushrooms have been constituted. Also, Letcher argues that the discourses (with their incumbent epistemologies and assumptions about ontology), which are utilised to answer questions about magic mushrooms and their effects upon consciousness, will shape the answers obtained. I shall now build upon this argument that discourse shapes the paradigms and questions employed when exploring magic mushrooms, by considering five key research literatures which have engaged with psilocybin mushrooms and the experiences they may occasion.

Firstly, *psychopharmacological research*, which uses experimental methods to investigate the subjective and physiological effects of, and potential uses for, the psychoactive chemicals found within magic mushrooms (psilocybin and psilocin, Passie et al 2002) upon human subjects⁷. Secondly, *psychedelic research*, a brief yet influential variation upon experimental research undertaken in the 1960s, which sought to explore non-pharmacological factors of ‘set and setting’, associated with psilocybin experiences (Metzner 2005). Thirdly, *auto-ethnographic literature*; metaphysical and counter-cultural considerations of magic mushrooms based upon writers’ personal experiences and the appropriation of indigenous knowledges. Fourthly *epidemiological research*, most closely associated with the discourses of prohibition and pathology and represented by social harm and medical case study research with magic mushrooms. Lastly, *social research* which uses survey, interview and focus group methods to explore the use of magic mushrooms in the social world, by engaging with magic mushroom users themselves. Each of these literatures impacts upon academic and popular understandings of magic mushrooms and the meanings associated with them and are therefore relevant for situating the present research concerning this overlooked substance. I shall begin by exploring research literature from a psychopharmacological perspective, which is presently the dominant research paradigm.

2.2 Psychopharmacological Research with Psilocybin

Psychopharmacological research has been undertaken into the effects of psilocybin as a synthetic and abstracted substance, rather than with magic mushrooms themselves. The active chemicals within mushrooms (psilocybin and psilocin) were isolated and synthesised as early as 1958 (Hoffman et al 1959) and were sold internationally in tablet form from Sandoz Laboratory to universities and psychotherapy centres as a research substance (Letcher 2007, Metzner 2005). Psychopharmacological research using psilocybin has been undertaken during two key historical periods. It was prevalent from the late 1950s until 1971, when psilocybin was banned internationally as a result of a UN Convention on Drugs (Walsh 2006). This was due to concerns about the increasing recreational counter-cultural use of hallucinogens during the 1960s (Wark & Galliher 2010). Since the late 1990s there has been a resurgence of psychopharmacological research with psilocybin, leading some commentators to state that the present age is the beginning of a ‘psychedelic renaissance’ (Sessa 2008). Recent psychopharmacological research is conducted within the dominant scientific-materialist paradigm, due to the precarious legal situation of researching controlled substances in experimental settings (Nutt, King & Nichols 2013), and to

⁷ I am omitting research administering psilocybin and psilocin to animals from this review as it is not pertinent to the present thesis (see Geyer et al 2001 for a review).

allay concerns of legitimacy due to the spectre of associations with the psychedelic ‘drug abusing’ counter-culture of the 1960s (Corbin 2012).

The methodology and epistemology of psychopharmacological research with psilocybin shares certain core features which vary slightly depending upon experimental design. The commonality between studies within this approach is that they share an adherence to a positivist and biological-materialist epistemology and the use of experimental methods (Langlitz 2010). All studies involve either the oral or intravenous administration of doses of synthetic psilocybin, in a laboratory or clinical context. Once administered, a variety of psychological and physiological measures (psychometric scales, cognitive tasks such as attention and timing tests, questionnaires, or brain imaging such as EEG, PET & fMRI), are applied to human participants at different times during the drug experience (at onset, peak, or after). This is to investigate the effects of (or an aspect of) psilocybin ingestion. Primacy is given to identifying the physiological and neurological actions of psilocybin and experiments are designed to unearth the neurochemical mechanisms by which psilocybin produces a particular array of subjective effects, as a function of biology (Langlitz 2012). As such, research findings are taken to be generalisable beyond the laboratory as they are considered to reflect the biological underpinnings of psilocybin experiences (Langlitz 2010, Corbin 2012).

The psychopharmacological literature can be subdivided into different subject areas depending upon the research focus and the way psilocybin is either investigated or used within the laboratory setting. For the purposes of this review I shall focus primarily upon ‘neuropsychological’ research (experiments which investigate psilocybin’s subjective effects upon the person and upon brain function) and ‘experimental mysticism’ (research exploring psilocybin’s ability to occasion mystical experiences). Psychopharmacological psilocybin research also utilises the substance as a ‘cognitive tool’ to investigate aspects of human cognition (Studerus, Komater, Hasler & Vollenweider 2011). It is also utilized as a ‘psychotomimetic’; conceptualised as occasioning experiences analogous to psychotic symptoms and used to model psychosis in laboratory settings (see Geyer & Vollenweider 2008 for a review).

2.2.1 Neuropsychological Research: Subjective Effects

The first wave of psychopharmacological research with synthetic psilocybin in the late 1950s and 1960s sought to explore the subjective physical and psychological effects of psilocybin as a novel substance; to test its experiential similarity to other hallucinogens, which are either chemically (indoleamines such as LSD) or subjectively (e.g. mescaline) related (Stafford 1992). A key aim underpinning early studies was to explore psilocybin’s potential as a psychological research

chemical and its possible application in drug assisted psychotherapy, which was already being undertaken with LSD and mescaline (Leary, Metzner & Weil 1992).

Early research consisted primarily of single-blind (the participant is unaware which substance they are ingesting, but the researcher is aware, Malitz et al 1960) placebo control studies where fixed doses of psilocybin, placebo or other research substances (e.g. LSD, mescaline) were administered to individual volunteers in a clinical setting. The subjective effects occasioned by psilocybin were then measured via physiological tests (EEG and physical examination), clinical observations, interviews by psychiatrists and in one study (Malitz et al 1960) the recording of participants' comments.

Examples of early research which explored the subjective effects of psilocybin include Delay et al (1959) who detailed thirty one 'psychic' effects of psilocybin by administering fixed doses (10mg) to volunteers and asylum inmates. These effects (measured via clinical interview and psychiatric observation) included attention difficulties, euphoria/dysphoria, extraversion, auditory hallucinations, and mood disturbances. Malitz et al (1960) conducted similar research, investigating the subjective effects of psilocybin by administering varied doses (8-36mg) to 14 (12 men 2 women) psychiatrically screened, drug naive volunteers. Using the clinical observations of psychiatrists and the verbatim comments of participants' experiencing psilocybin, Malitz et al detailed a range of possible psilocybin effects. These included perceptual illusions and distortions (visual, temporal, and hallucinatory), feelings of euphoria, paranoia, and cognitive alterations (disordered thought and delusion). The researchers also measured physiological responses and took EEG readings which correlated with those they had obtained when testing LSD on participants. Malitz et al noted that psilocybin did not produce the same effects of mysticism and euphoria in the laboratory, which were reported with mushrooms by Wasson (1957) in an ethnographic context. They attributed this to setting and expectation, as Wasson consumed mushrooms in a religious ritual compared to their participants who were in a clinical setting. The recommendations from their research were that if psilocybin was to be used as a psychotherapeutic agent, it should only be used in in-patient settings due to the ways in which it altered participants' behavior and sense of reality.

Comparison studies with other hallucinogenic substances and placebos were also common at this time; Isbell (1959) compared psilocybin with LSD in a within participants design (all participants received both substances and placebo in a randomized way). They concluded that psilocybin and LSD have a similar pattern of central nervous system activation and subjective effects, but psilocybin has a shorter duration of action and is significantly less potent (producing a less extreme array of psychological effects), making it better suited to research and therapeutic application. Wolbach et al (1962) compared psilocybin, psilocin (the de-phosphorated metabolite of psilocybin,

also found in magic mushrooms), mescaline and LSD, by randomized administration of substances with no placebo control to 10 former morphine addicts. The study suggested that all three substances occasion comparable subjective effects, but LSD and mescaline have greater potency and a longer duration of action than psilocin and psilocybin.

These early studies have subsequently been criticized for being methodologically and ethically flawed, lacking the rigor of a double-blind placebo control paradigm and administering psilocybin to psychologically unprepared subjects in a confrontational clinical setting (Leary, Litwin & Metzner 1963, Johnson, Richards & Griffiths 2008). However, this approach to studying psilocybin as a discreet substance has informed current psychopharmacological research which seeks to explore the subjective effects of psilocybin. Both early and recent research shares an abstracted biological reductionist framework where psilocybin is administered to participants in a controlled setting (Corbin 2012).

What has changed in contemporary research is a more supportive approach to participant welfare within clinical settings, such as greater concern for their psychological and physical comfort and the use of ‘talking down’ to address challenging experiences (Johnson, Richards & Griffiths 2008, Langlitz 2010). Methodologically, the majority of psilocybin experiments since the resurgence of hallucinogen research have employed a dose response double-blind placebo control paradigm. A double-blind placebo control trial involves the random administration of either a test substance or a pharmacologically active or inert placebo, with neither participant nor experimenter knowing which substance is being tested (Julien 2004, Langlitz 2012). This is an attempt to control for the potentially biasing effects of researcher and participant expectations (Geyer & Vollenweider 2008; Johnson, Richards & Griffiths 2008). The underlying assumption of randomised placebo control trials is that all psychosocial and cultural factors are held constant; when the placebo’s effects are subtracted from the effects of the pharmacological agent, what is identified are the effects of psilocybin in its purest biological form (Langlitz 2012).

More recent research which has sought to explore the subjective effects of psilocybin ingestion include a comprehensive placebo controlled study with healthy volunteers in a clinical setting conducted by Hasler, Grimberg, Benz, Huber & Vollenweider (2004). They employed a within-subjects double-blind placebo control experiment to measure a range of physiological, somatosensory, affective and cognitive effects of varied doses of psilocybin (four doses and a placebo were used, ranging from very low to high based on a milligrams to kilograms calculation for each participant), at different stages of the drug onset and peak of action. The aim of the study was to explore the dose response relationship of psilocybin on various physiological and psychological parameters, in order to provide comprehensive data on psilocybin administration for researchers seeking to use it as a research tool.

Hasler et al took a range of physiological measures (heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature) and measured certain psychological parameters (including alterations to waking consciousness, affect and attention) via self-report psychometric rating scales and a paper and pencil based attention task. Predominant among these measures was the 'Altered States of Consciousness' questionnaire (ASC) (Dittrich 1998), which attempts to descriptively and schematically⁸ measure psychological alterations to consciousness. It uses five indices which are; oceanic boundlessness (euphoria, derealisation and depersonalisation), anxious ego dissolution (negative mood, loss of self-control, delusion), visionary re-structuralisation (hallucination and perceptual alteration), auditory alterations and reduction of vigilance (attention and genitive disturbance). Their results confirmed the safety of psilocybin administration in a supportive environment and provides a detailed mapping of psilocybin's dose dependent effects upon perception, ego-functioning, affect and attention. The authors note that higher doses were strongly associated with a more pronounced loss of a sense of self (ego-dissolution), a greater sense of derealisation (oceanic boundlessness) and visual disturbance (hallucination) and though well tolerated can occasion more challenging experiences than lower doses. For this reason the authors advise psychological screening of research participants as the challenging experiences psilocybin can occasion could potentially aggravate latent psychiatric illnesses. Physiologically they found psilocybin to be well tolerated, producing only a mild increase in heart rate and blood pressure. Hasler and colleagues research findings provide information for mushroom users interested in safety, tolerability, dosage and a schematic description of the psychological and physical effects of psilocybin. It also provides information for psilocybin researchers who wish to use it as a 'cognitive tool'.

2.2.2 Psilocybin as Cognitive Tool

The studies listed so far attempted to investigate the subjective psychological effects of psilocybin ingestion in human volunteers. Researchers have also utilized psilocybin as a research tool; rather than investigating psilocybin's effects, it is deployed in experiments as an apparatus to investigate brain functioning. For example, the perceptual disturbances that psilocybin can elicit have been used to investigate the neurochemical mechanisms underpinning visual attention (Carter et al 2004, Komater et al 2011) and time perception (Wittman et al 2007, Wackerman, Wittman, Hasler & Vollenweider 2008). A key research area where psilocybin has been used as a cognitive tool is 'psychotomimetic' research. This is an approach which conceptualizes psilocybin as occasioning a state of disturbed consciousness analogous to acute psychosis (Geyer & Vollenweider 2008). Researchers have used psilocybin to investigate 'experimental psychosis' via a range of brain imaging studies (Vollenweider et al 1997, Carhart-Harris et al 2012), concurrent drug administration studies (testing if drugs which block certain neurotransmitters mitigate psilocybin effects, e.g. Vollenweider et al 1998) and specialized

⁸ Although this scale aims to categorise altered states of consciousness 'neutrally' by categorising experiences in a non-culturally specific schematic way, it is debatable that any categorisation of psilocybin experiences is truly neutral, as all classification is a constructive act (Slattery 2008).

experimental designs relevant to theories of psychosis (Vollenweider et al 2007, Umbricht et al 2003). The intention is to further psychopharmacological knowledge of psychotic states and to propose drug treatments. Again, these studies adhere to a materialist biological paradigm, and are using psilocybin to research the neurological underpinnings of psychosis and cognition.

Because of the specialist nature of these studies and their application to the fields of psychiatry and cognitive neuroscience I have not focused on them in depth in this review. However, it is important to note that brain imaging studies of psilocybin's neurological action often receive extensive media coverage, and can appear to demonstrate 'scientific proof' that psilocybin affects consciousness in certain ways (Langlitz 2010, 2012, Frazzetto & Anker 2009).

2.2.3 Experimental Mysticism

Psychopharmacological research has also been undertaken to investigate the potential of psilocybin to occasion 'mystical experiences'; states of consciousness characterized by '*ineffability, unity [with the universe], intuitive knowledge, transcendence of time and space, sacredness and profoundly positive mood*' (Richards 2008, pg. 195). This is inspired in part by the spiritual and divinatory use of psilocybin mushrooms by indigenous peoples in South and Central America and by claims from early experiential researchers that psychedelics occasion experiences of transcendence and divinity (James 1902, Huxley 1954, Wasson 1957, Leary 1969, Richards 2008). The rationale for this research is to investigate whether a reliable 'mystical' psychological state can be chemically induced by psilocybin, to investigate the neurological underpinnings of mystical experiences, and to explore the potential use of psychopharmacological states of mysticism in areas of psychotherapeutic medicine (Kleber 2006, Richards 2008).

Griffiths, Richards, McCann & Jesse (2006) conducted a double blind between groups cross over placebo control study with a group of 36 (14 male, 22 female) psychologically healthy, hallucinogen-naïve and spiritually active (participating in prayer groups, church attendance, and meditation classes) adults using a high dose of psilocybin and a pharmacologically active placebo (methylphenidate). Participants received both the test substance and placebo during trials separated by two months. The test sessions involved a series of preparatory meetings to provide information about possible experiences and build rapport between volunteer participants and two researchers who would offer support during the sessions. During the individual trials where participants were administered psilocybin or a placebo, participants lay in a comfortable living room like environment, wore eyeshades and listened to classical music through headphones, with two researchers on standby to talk them through any difficult experiences. After the drug trial subjects were asked to complete a series of questionnaires on hallucinogenic experience, mystical experience (based on Stace 1960s research into mysticism), state of consciousness and affective and cognitive wellbeing. A two month follow up

session was conducted, as were telephone interviews with three friends or relatives to assess behavioural changes. Griffiths et al found statistically significant effects of psilocybin on mystical experience ratings when compared to placebo both between and within participants. They also found subsequent lasting positive behavioural and affective changes two months after the experience, based upon participants' self-report and the ratings of family members and friends acting as observers. The majority of participants stated that the experience was highly spiritually significant to them.

A subsequent 14 month follow up study was conducted (Griffiths, Richards, Johnson et al 2008). It involved using questionnaires and verbatim comments from open clinical interviews, to retrospectively investigate the experience in the test session and to explore any persisting attitudinal and behavioral effects stemming from the mystical experience. Results supported the hypothesis that participants' mystical experiences had a lasting and positive impact upon their lives. These findings support previous research; Doblin (1991) undertook a twenty five year follow study up with people who participated in an experiment concerning the mystical potential of psilocybin in the early 1960s. His results also indicated that psilocybin ingestion can create lasting positive and spiritually significant experiences. Research into the mystical potential of psilocybin is currently ongoing (MAPS 2013), and proposed research will attempt to explore experimental mysticism as a possible psychotherapeutic tool.

2.2.4 Applications: Therapeutic Agents

The ultimate goal of much psychopharmacological research has been to develop therapeutic uses of psilocybin in an inpatient context. This can be seen in the research of Grob et al (2010) who conducted a within participants double blind placebo control pilot study to explore the feasibility of psilocybin therapy for existential anxiety disorders relating to terminal cancer. Twelve patients with end-stage terminal cancer were administered with a low dose of psilocybin and a placebo. Grob et al found that psilocybin produced a significant reduction in anxiety and a mild improvement in mood. Their results confirm the feasibility and safety in using psilocybin to assist in amelioration of end-stage cancer anxiety and suggest that further research might involve higher dosages of psilocybin to utilize the potential transcendental or mystical experiences it can occasion (as identified by Griffiths et al 2006). This research is set to continue and presently proposals are being undertaken to investigate whether the same state of transcendence can assist in the cessation of chemical addictions (Burdick & Adinoff 2013). A further pilot study of the potential therapeutic application of psilocybin was conducted by Moreno, Wiegand, Keolani-Taitano & Delgado (2006). They administered psilocybin to nine participants to test the clinical efficacy of psilocybin in relieving the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in treatment resistant patients. A double blind placebo controlled dose effect paradigm was used and diagnostic measures of symptomology were administered before and after testing. Moreno et al found an acute reduction in obsessive compulsive behaviour and made suggestions for further research to more fully explore

serotonergic involvement in OCD and possible clinical applications. This research has not yet been continued. Psychopharmacological application of psilocybin as a therapeutic agent is currently just beginning to be explored in research, and advocates of this work are enthusiastic about its future potential (Sessa 2008).

In summary psychopharmacological approaches to studying magic mushrooms and their effects use the synthesized and abstracted psychoactive substance in mushrooms, psilocybin, as both an object of study and as a cognitive and potential psychotherapeutic tool. Central to this field of research is the predominant attribution of the effects of psilocybin as a 'drug' which exerts a neurobiological action (Langlitz 2010). Methods are deployed which seek to isolate this psychopharmacological action, and whilst some non-pharmacological factors are acknowledged as influencing the subjective nature of experiences with psilocybin (namely mood and its effect upon good or bad 'trips') these are considered as secondary to the core generalisable biological interaction of substance and brain structure (Langlitz 2010, 2012). Other factors such as culture and psychosocial context are not considered as important in this research area (Langlitz 2012). I shall now explore a short lived approach from the 1960s which also took psilocybin as its object of research, but which conceptualized the substance and its effects in a radically different way, one which prioritized the psychological over psychopharmacological.

2.3 Psychedelic Research on the Effects of Psilocybin

2.3.1 Psychedelic Methods and the Harvard Psilocybin Project

Psychedelic means 'mind manifesting' (Stafford 1992) and emphasizes an approach to understanding the class of chemicals to which psilocybin belongs in more psychological than biological terms. The most (in)famous psychedelic research was conducted between 1963 and 1968 by psychologists Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, as part of the Harvard Psilocybin Project; a short lived research endeavor at Harvard University which broke with the traditional approach to scientific substance research and subsequently fell afoul of bureaucratic, moral and legal concerns (Wark & Galliher 2010, Metzner 2005). Researchers involved in this project conceptualized psilocybin as a substance which could occasion personally transformative and mystical experiences, but in contrast to psychopharmacology did not conceptualize this as a function of pharmacology and biological action. Instead the psychedelic approach considered the effects of psilocybin to be a cumulative product of the relationships between psilocybin, mind and environment. This is typically expressed as the interaction of 'substance' - the chemical, 'set' - an individual's immediate psychology or state of mind and 'setting' - the social and physical environment in which they consume the substance (Leary, Metzner & Weil 1963, Zinberg 1984). As this quote from Leary indicates;

'of course, the drug does not produce the transcendent experience. It merely acts as a chemical key- it opens the mind, frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures. The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting.'
(Leary, Metzner, & Alpert 1964, pg. 11).

In contrast to psychopharmacological research, Leary argued that psilocybin produced experiences which are best thought of as 'liminal'; it is not the substance, but the users' individual psychological state and context of use which affect the nature of psilocybin experiences.

In order to explore this combination of factors upon psilocybin experiences the Harvard Psilocybin Project team developed a 'social methodology' in which groups of participants and also researchers took psilocybin together in comfortable social surroundings, at doses of their own choosing and were subsequently asked to complete questionnaire measures (Metzner 2005). The researchers favoured this social methodology over the isolated clinical testing used by psychopharmacologists (e.g. Malitz et al 1960) stating that they were not focusing on the investigation of psilocybin as a purely biological substance, but were instead exploring the effects of interpersonal and social contexts upon the experiences of altered consciousness which psilocybin may occasion. Furthermore, there was a moral and political dimension to their research design, as Leary and Allpert insisted that researchers also take psilocybin (both as an exercise in its own right and during experimental sessions) in order that they may understand the subjective experience from a firsthand perspective and to aid others with their experiences. Leary is quoted as stating that research into psychedelics should be conducted '*with subjects rather than on subjects*' (Wark & Galliher 2010, pg. 2).

Leary, Litwin & Metzner (1963) provides one example of this research. They sought to examine the effects of supportive social environments upon experiences with psilocybin. Participants were allocated to different sized groups (large 9-21, medium 6-8, and small 2-5) in a living room environment (considered a positive 'setting'), where psilocybin in capsule form was made available so participants could consume doses of their own choosing and could interact with each other, art and music whilst 'tripping'. Each group was comprised of a mixture of experienced and inexperienced psychedelic users and a researcher acting as group leader who had familiarity consuming psilocybin and who did so during the experiment. Participants were administered with post-hoc questionnaires following the experiment and were asked to retrospectively rate their experiences on a number of dimensions regarding pleasantness, learning, life change, situational effects and the main effects of the drug (e.g. perceptual changes, mood alterations and somatosensory effects). Analysis suggested that small supportive groups, a positive set and a pleasant setting tended to produce more positive experiences, whilst larger groups and a negative set provoked anxious experiences.

A subsequent study by Metzner, Litwin & Weil (1965) employed a similar methodology (free administration of psilocybin in supportive groups of varying size, in a pleasant setting), but more directly investigated the impact of 'set' in terms of subjects' prior mood and expectations of psilocybin. The researchers administered questionnaires regarding mood and expectation before and after the drug sessions, addressing a critique of Leary et al's (1963) previous study that the data they collected was retrospective. All subjects were prepared for the range of possible psychological effects by the research team prior to ingesting the drug. The results demonstrated that of possible prior set variables, emotional state or mood had an important effect on the subsequent experience with psilocybin. Anxiety prior to ingestion correlated with paranoid negative experiences, whilst more optimistic and positive moods correlated with positive experiences. Expectations of what psilocybin experiences would be like did not affect the nature of the experience obtained, e.g. expectation of obtaining visual hallucinations neither increased nor decreased the occasioning of an experience of this type. The researchers also noted the most commonly reported aspect of the experience was the '*perception of new meaning*' (defined as a hitherto unseen meaning to self, life, or the universe) and the least commonly reported experience was visual hallucinations. The researchers accounted for participants' different experiences as an outcome of body weight, age, prior drug experience and personality.

These experiments were intended to assess the impact of non-pharmacological factors upon experiences with psilocybin and the experimental design had less in common with clinical studies conducted by other researchers and more in common with a 'happening'; a party common to Bohemian and artistic individuals in the 1960s, where people consumed psychedelics in social settings (Wark & Galliher 2010). It was this methodology and its association with counter-cultural activities (Ken Kessey famously organised LSD based happenings for counter-cultural purposes, described as 'acid tests'- Wolfe 1968) which lead to difficulties between the researchers, Harvard University and the United States legal system (Wark & Galliher 2010).

In spite of their inventive methodology and rejection of pharmacology, a potential criticism of the Harvard team is their tendency to see the psilocybin experience as unitary; that there is a core experience which is pharmacologically induced by psilocybin, which is then attenuated solely by set and setting variables (Leary, Metzner, & Alpert 1964⁹). This position denies the impact of culture and subjectivity upon the shaping of experiences with psychedelics; peoples from indigenous cultures with animist worldviews would not recognise the core experience as represented by Leary et al (Partridge 2003, Letcher 2007). As well as attempting to investigate the effects of set and setting upon social experiences with psilocybin, the project also saw the

⁹ This position is evidenced in Leary, Allpert & Metzner's (1964) book '*The Psychedelic Experience*', where they developed the Eastern mystical tract '*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*' into a manual for psychedelic users to attain the 'correct' set and setting to ensure positive and transformative experiences.

undertaking of the first experimental study of psilocybin occasioned mysticism.

2.3.2 Psychedelic Mysticism

A psychedelic study into the proposed mystical experiences which psilocybin may occasion was conducted by Pahnke (1963). The rationale for this experiment was based upon anthropological reports that in indigenous spiritual contexts the mushrooms could occasion experiences of a divine or mystical nature (Wasson 1957), and to explore if psychedelics could occasion comparable mystical experiences to those reported in the study of religion and mysticism (James 1902, Stace 1960). If psilocybin could, then mystical experiences could be induced chemically (with the right 'set and setting') and could in turn be experimentally investigated. Pahnke employed a randomized double blind matched group placebo control design in which a group of 20 mentally and physically healthy, psychedelically naïve, Protestant divinity students were administered a high dose of psilocybin or an active placebo during a private Good Friday church service. The intention behind using divinity students in the context of a Christian religious ceremony was to test the 'set and setting' hypothesis currently being explored by Leary's team; divinity students were thought to have a 'set' of religiosity and a religious ceremony conducted in a chapel provided a 'setting' which was thought more likely to evoke mystical experience (Darling, Doblin, & Metzner 2005). Psilocybin-experienced research assistants were present to inform participants of potential effects (excluding potential mystical aspects which were the study's focus) and to act as supportive guides where necessary. An interview and two questionnaires (one a 9 category typology of 'mystical experience' modeled after the psychology of religion) were deployed to assess the nature and content of the experience immediately after the experiment and in a six month follow up. Pahnke found that participants given psilocybin were statistically more likely to encounter mystical experiences than those given a placebo and that these experiences had a positive effect on subsequent behavior, assessed a number of months later.

Doblin (1991) conducted a 25 year follow up and methodological critique of Pahnke's experiment by interviewing participants (both those who received psilocybin and controls) about their experiences and re-administering the original questionnaire measures to examine any enduring effects of mystical experience. Doblin notes criticisms of Pahnke's reporting of the negative effects of the experiment upon some volunteers; he omitted from his reports that a participant had to be tranquillized with Thorazine due to a severe negative reaction and also understated how challenging (but valuable) some participants found their experiences. In spite of this Doblin found that the participants he located were pleased to have participated in the study. All of the participants Doblin interviewed who had received psilocybin considered their experience to be of a mystical nature and as having a lasting effect on their spiritual lives, reducing their fear of death and tolerance for the beliefs of others, whereas none of the control participants did so. The psilocybin-receiving

participants also appeared to exhibit long term positive change, deepening their joy for their work, increasing their concern for others and boldness in standing up for principles. Although many found it challenging, they reported ultimately valuing the experience. After re-administering the mysticism scale retrospectively and finding similar results to Pahnke years later, Doblin supported the original conclusions of Pahnke and recommended further empirical study, provided it included a supportive setting with greater concern for participant welfare. Pahnke's (1963) study although it precedes more recent research into experimental mysticism (Griffiths et al 2006), differs significantly in treating 'set and setting' as objects of study which impact upon the experience, rather than as variables which need to be controlled for, and in this regard it can be seen as psychedelic research.

2.3.3 Crisis and Counter-Culture

Despite (or because of) the early success of the Harvard Psilocybin Project, the administration of Harvard University and subsequently the legislative bodies of the United States had serious reservations about the work being undertaken and ultimately psilocybin was banned in the USA in 1968 and internationally in 1971 (Wark & Galliher 2010). Their social methodology, insistence upon the research team using psilocybin both before and during experiments, administration of the drug to undergraduate students and the subsequent link between psychedelics and a burgeoning counter-culture, lead firstly to Harvard administrators becoming concerned for their academic reputation and subsequently drew the attention of the authorities (Wark & Galliher 2010). This was also due to Leary's self-defined role as a counter-cultural icon and with the collapse of the research project and his expulsion from Harvard, he rapidly became a notorious public spokesperson for the 'acid generation' (Wark & Galliher 2010).

In establishing himself as a counter-cultural figure Leary wrote numerous books to advance his belief that a more widespread use of psychedelics (primarily LSD, but also magic mushrooms) could usher in a new social order, built upon connections and relationships between peoples, individual selves and the broader universe. Leary's most famous advocacy of psychedelics as assisting in the breaking from conventional societal roles and structures, and aiding in the formation of new ones, is the now famous slogan '*turn on, tune in, drop out*', (Wells 1973, Roberts 2008). Wells (1973) identifies this as a three part psychedelic philosophy. Firstly, '*dropping out*' which is a departure from the social 'norms' of educational and employment 'roles' (a trajectory from schooling, career employment and subsequent retirement) and 'goals' of obtaining personal economic and social power. Leary advocated a rejection of society's preoccupation with status and material wealth at the expense of pursuing a spiritual life. '*Dropping out*' could be temporary, but the intention behind it was to distance oneself from the mid-20th century American capitalist lifestyle and to challenge this in collective ways (Wells 1973). The next stage in Leary's

philosophy is to '*turn on*' which involves establishing a new awareness of self by consuming psychedelics (typically LSD, but this practice was extended to mushrooms) in order to experience the altered states of consciousness they occasion, to attain new insight into the self and one's relationship to the universe and spirituality (Wells 1973). '*Tuning in*' is the subsequent alteration in personal and collective social values that this new insight enables, which involves the quest for spiritual contentment, through a preoccupation with ethics, beauty and aestheticism (Wells 1973).

The significance of Leary's philosophy lay in providing a social context and framework for the 'appropriate' use of psychedelics as agents of personal and social change; no longer were they conceptualised solely as novel recreational or spiritual substances, but were instead imbued with a greater revolutionary potential as the late 1960s and 1970s continued (Wells 1973). It is important to note that psychedelic substances do not occasion counter-cultural and social revolutionary understandings in and of themselves as a function of biology or subjective psychological action. This is a discourse for conceptualising psychedelics, which arose out of a particular historically situated social and discursive milieu, which cast the 'mind expanding' properties of these substances as aiding a counter-cultural revolutionary agenda (Letcher 2007, Roberts 2008).

Psychedelic understandings of psilocybin and related substances became (and continue to be) disavowed by researchers due to the negative image of recreational 'abuse' and the international prohibition of psilocybin even for research purposes until recent times (Walsh 2006). Instead psychedelics became associated with the 'hippie' counter cultural movements (Hedgepeth & Stock 1970, Crumb 2000), where the use of psychedelic chemicals (most commonly LSD) became a social and creative endeavour. Psychedelic culture and ideology was notably formed upon the chemical psychedelics, LSD and psilocybin, and it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the use of mushrooms became more widespread (Letcher 2006). Although the 'hippie' movement has often been considered a failure, the ideology associated with it continued within subsequent counter-cultural subcultures which arose in the 1970s and 1980s which engaged with psychedelic substances including magic mushrooms, such as Acid House and the New Age Traveller movement (Letcher 2006, Hetherington 2000). Psychedelic culture and philosophy has also permeated broader culture (Letcher 2006, Roberts 2008).

Whilst mushroom use was a marginal activity during the height of the psychedelic movement, from the late 1950s and into the 1960s auto-ethnographic research was being conducted by influential figures who sought to publicise spiritual conceptions of magic mushrooms. Whilst not antithetical to the aims of psychedelic counter-culture, this research developed conceptions which took a slightly different direction, away from the psychological expansion of consciousness advocated by psychedelia and into the realms of the ecological and metaphysical.

2.4 Mushroom Auto-ethnographies: Psychonauts, Entheogens and Elves

Auto-ethnographic¹⁰ research with magic mushrooms is where researchers and writers have consumed psilocybin mushrooms (often in loosely anthropological contexts) and produced first-person accounts of their own subjective experiences. Much research of this type has not been conducted within typical academic research paradigms, but has instead been undertaken by writers who provide, theorize and publicize accounts of their subjective experiences for the broader public. This renders this literature problematic as a form of research, since many writers have not engaged in the reflexive practices or methodological rigors associated with academic auto-ethnography (Hayano 2013). Much of this literature is perhaps best thought of as ‘fringe’ research and the writers who have provided such accounts of mushroom experiences should, rather than being considered ‘researchers’, be thought of as ‘psychonauts’; a term some have used to describe themselves. This term translates as ‘explorers of the psyche’, but has come to mean those who consume psychedelics and detail or theorize their experiences (Luke 2011). I shall begin by considering three of the most influential writers on mushrooms, who have taken a broadly auto-ethnographic approach.

2.4.1 Key Writers of Mushroom Auto-ethnography

There are a number of key writers who have drawn upon their own experiences with magic mushrooms and have produced popular books and articles outlining their interpretations of what psilocybin mushrooms do, are and are for. The three writers of particular importance I wish to focus on in this review are R. Gordon Wasson, Carlos Castaneda and Terrence McKenna, starting with the philosophy espoused by Wasson.

Wasson

R. Gordon Wasson was an amateur mycologist, credited with introducing psilocybin mushrooms to the Western world in 1957 (Letcher 2006). As stated in the introduction, Wasson was pursuing an interest in the cultural uses of mushrooms and in 1956 as a result of meeting the Oxaca *curandera* (wise woman) Maria Sabina in Mexico, he became one of the first Westerners to be allowed to participate in a *velada* (healing ritual) where he ingested a large dose of psilocybin mushrooms (Reidlinger 2005, Letcher 2006). Wasson can be seen as taking a loosely auto-ethnographic approach, as his understanding of magic mushrooms was based largely upon his direct experiences of consuming them and also his preconceived notions about ‘ethnomycology’; at the time, Wasson

¹⁰ My use of the term auto-ethnographic is just one interpretation of the term and associated self-reflective research methodologies. My use of the term and interpretation of the methodology is exemplified by Huxley’s 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*, in which he described and theorised his experiences with mescaline. For a detailed exploration of academic auto-ethnography in the social sciences, see Sikes 2013.

was in the process of forming a thesis about the role of psychoactive mushrooms in human history and the history of religion (Letcher 2006). Wasson considered the mushrooms to be ‘sacred’ and wrote extensively of the spiritual, visionary and mystical experiences he had with them (Wasson 1985, Letcher 2006). For example he states that:

‘[the mushroom] permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life, to travel backwards and forwards in time, to enter other planes of existence, even, as the Indians say, to go where God is’ (Wasson 1980, pg. 28).

As a result of his experiences and his overriding belief in the historicity of mushroom use in religion (Letcher 2006), Wasson became a proselytizer for a reverent and sacramental use and understanding of the ‘sacred mushroom’ (his preferred term) in his books and articles (Reidlinger 2005).

Critics have noted that Wasson’s accounts of mushroom occasioned mysticism are heavily influenced by his own devoted Christianity and associated Western conceptions of mysticism (concerning a sense of unity, a personal link with divinity, and ecstatic visions) (Letcher 2006). This is at odds with the animist cosmology of the culture from which Wasson appropriated mushrooms, which does not conceptualise them as ‘sacred’ or religious, but instead as sentient spirits (*los ninitos*- the little children) which impart wisdom to a shaman to aid in healing (Letcher 2006). The extent of Wasson’s positioning of the mushroom as a mystical sacrament can be seen in his involvement in establishing the term ‘entheogen’¹¹ meaning ‘manifesting the divine within’; a neologism specifically coined to classify and define magic mushrooms (and other psychedelics) by their ability to induce ‘*states of shamanic and ecstatic possession*’ (Ruck et al 1979; pg. 146). The intention behind this new term was to distance ‘appropriate’ spiritual and reverential use of the mushroom as ‘sacrament’, from psychopharmacological and hedonistic understandings and uses of mushrooms (Letcher 2007). Wasson and his associates psychonautic advocacy of mushrooms as ‘entheogens’, and their promotion of them as facilitators of mystical experience can be seen as a tactic of legitimisation which seeks to construct mushrooms in religious terms to justify their use (Letcher 2007). By constituting mushrooms as occasioning divine mystical experiences, Wasson and colleagues proposed that they should be consumed reverently for the purposes of transcendentalism.

¹¹ The term entheogen has developed a contemporary meaning beyond the one originally coined by Ruck et al (1979) and has come to be used to denote recreational and neo-shamanistic use of plant-based hallucinogens specifically (Tramacchi 2006). In this thesis I use the term entheogen in its traditional meaning as occasioning the divine within, and the term ‘neo-shamanic’ for the ethos associated with plant-based hallucinogens.

Wasson's experiences were informed by his pseudo-anthropological expeditions to Mexico and his subsequent works, though popular and inspirational to some psychedelic enquirers, didn't achieve mass appeal within the burgeoning counter-culture of the mid-1960s (Letcher 2006). Another contemporary psychonaut did however break into popular consciousness at that time. He claimed to have gained spiritual insight from the use of magic mushrooms in an indigenous culture of South America and was called Carlos Castaneda.

Castaneda

Carlos Castaneda's 1968 book *The Teaching of Don Juan and the Yaqui Way of Knowledge* became a best seller and through it and its numerous sequels he popularised the use of hallucinogenic plants and introduced 'neo-shamanism' to the West (Hardman 2007). Castaneda's book was written as a piece of ethnobotanical anthropology (his Masters dissertation at UCLA), where he claimed that through his field work he became the student of a Yaqui shaman called Don Juan (Castaneda 1968). In the book and its numerous sequels, he describes his initiation into the spiritual system of his mentor and how his experiential engagement with the world of Don Juan challenged his Western ideas of rationalism and materialism (Hardman 2007). Castaneda writes of Don Juan's metaphysical philosophy that the world is comprised of separate but equal realities; 'ordinary reality' which is the default of waking consciousness and 'non-ordinary reality' a hidden realm of spirits and powers where magic is real. Non-ordinary reality is made perceptible to the shaman by use of hallucinogenic plants (enabling him to 'see' whereas others 'look') and psilocybin mushrooms (known as '*humito*' - the little smoke). These plants and fungi are represented as powerful sentient entities; 'the allies' who aid the shaman on his warriors quest to become 'a man of knowledge' (Castaneda 1968). Castaneda argued through Don Juan that the West had lost contact with non-ordinary reality due to the dominance of materialism and rationalism; other magical realities can only be accessed by altered consciousness and need to be experienced rather than rationalised. Castaneda's story pushed the limits of credibility with descriptions of flight and passing through solid objects. Despite the outlandishness of Castaneda's accounts they were seen as plausible in the context in which they were written, endorsed by other academics studying shamanism (notably Michal Harner) and were widely read by the general public (Hardman 2007).

However, since the 1970s critics have questioned the credibility of Castaneda's accounts. Pollock (1976a) had no success with smoking mushrooms as described by Castaneda and declared it a metaphorical device. Richard de Mille (Castaneda's fiercest critic) conducted a rhetorical deconstruction of Castaneda's works; challenging the veracity of the language used by Don Juan and the stories' internal logic across volumes, declaring it to be a hoax (Drury 1989). Wasson, finding Castaneda's experience to be so different from his and others, together with Castaneda's

reluctance to provide a specimen of the mushroom he had supposedly ingested (allegedly obtained from a desert where no mushrooms grow), declared his work '*bad science fiction badly written*' (Letcher 2006, Hardman 2007). Whilst largely demonstrated to be an elaborate fiction Castaneda's works were seen at the time, and still are by some enthusiasts, as factual and have been an inspiration to many in their use of hallucinogens. Hardman (2007) argues that Castaneda's works operate as allegory to many people; providing a New Age alternative to the dominant post-Enlightenment world view of the West and allowing them to conceive of their own hallucinogen experiences as encounters with non-ordinary reality. In this regard the fictional or factual nature of Castaneda's own experiences is less important to people than the 'truth' of how his invented tradition chimes with their beliefs and experiences. For many, as Hardman succinctly puts it '*he may be lying but what he says is true*' (pg. 38).

McKenna

A more recent prominent author is the 'psychonaut in chief' of the early 1990s Terrence McKenna. McKenna was a famous advocate of magic mushrooms, who rose to prominence as a public figure through bestselling books and lectures, espousing his experiential theorising regarding the power and potential of psilocybin mushrooms. McKenna was a psychedelic adventurer taking expeditions to South America to consume 'heroic doses' of plant-based hallucinogens (up to 5 dry grams of mushrooms) in order to challenge his sense of reality (Letcher 2006). His books *The Invisible Landscape* (1975), *The Archaic Revival* (1991) and *Food of the Gods* (1992) outline his theorisations of the role of magic mushrooms in broader society and human history. There are three key strands to McKenna's philosophy; the nature of psychedelic experience as revelatory and illuminating of hidden truth, the role of psilocybin mushrooms as catalysts in human evolution of consciousness, and speculation about the nature of metaphysical realities made accessible with mushrooms (Letcher 2006).

McKenna was a staunch advocate of 'psychedelic shamanism', proposing that Western civilisation needs to undertake an 'archaic revival' by using plant-based psychedelics and mushrooms to return to a more ecological and communal worldview, informed by the shamanistic religions of pre-historic and indigenous cultures (McKenna 1992). McKenna established a dichotomy between natural and synthetic substances in his writings and was strongly opposed to the prohibition of 'natural hallucinogens'. He argued that psychedelic substances which occur 'naturally' (without chemical synthesis or extraction) and which have been used by indigenous peoples for generations, should be made accessible to those in the West who wish to alter their consciousness and that this would be for the betterment of human kind (McKenna 1992). He viewed his experiences when taking 'heroic doses' (up to 5 dry grams) of mushrooms as revelatory, allowing him to communicate with magic mushrooms as sentient alien entities, with whom he conversed about the

nature of reality (McKenna 1991). He also claimed that with the correct mental focus mushrooms enable one to access ontologically real, yet typically hidden alternate realities (which he dubbed 'hyperspace') populated by 'self-replicating machine elves'; sentient entities which exist on a metaphysical plane who can communicate with humans (McKenna 1991). McKenna's thought is underpinned by the argument that there is a constant metaphysical truth which can be made accessible by the use of hallucinogens (Letcher 2006) and that Western rationalist and scientific materialism limits humanity by negating the magical, divinatory and experiential value of knowledge gained from altered states of consciousness.

As Letcher (2006) notes however, McKenna is sketchy in his writings as to what extent he saw his experiences as psychological phenomena, or that he believed in the external agency of psilocybin mushrooms and hidden realities (he seems to veer between these two ideas). Critics of McKenna have noted that his philosophy is utopian and unscientific, praises drugs he enjoys whilst condemning other substances and is heavily coloured by his own personal agenda as a late 20th Century North American. Letcher (2006) notes that a *curandera* like Maria Sabina would recognise little in McKenna's writing of her own experience, due to the difference in worldview. Undoubtedly however McKenna influenced another generation of people curious about psychedelics with his lurid writing and advocacy of closed eye, silent, meditative techniques of mushroom consumption (Letcher 2006).

The three psychonauts I have detailed represent an academically marginal approach to researching magic mushrooms, engaging with the substances experientially and writing and theorising about these experiences in popular books and articles intended for the general public. Whilst their 'research' can be questioned, due to the lack of mediation of their own assumptions, prejudices and worldviews, they have undeniably brought the concepts of neo-shamanism and spiritual and animist uses of mushrooms to popular attention. The tradition of psychonautic research is continued by more recent authors such as Pinchbeck (2006) (notable for his reporting of experiences of mushroom occasioned entities) and Powell (2012), who also advocate New Age philosophies informed by their use of mushrooms.

2.4.2 Trip Reports and Online Psychonauts

As well as those accounts of famous writers, there are also repositories of amateur psychonauts reporting their experiences. These take the form of 'trip reports'; descriptive accounts of personal experiences which are published in books and on internet databases. Metzner (2005) in his edited collection of essays regarding '*teonanacatl*' (the Mazatec name of psilocybin mushrooms) devotes the second half of the book (entitled 'Experiential teachings from the Mushroom Spirits' pg. 191) to autobiographical trip reports from 20 individuals (male and female of varying ages and from a

variety of professions) who have ingested psilocybin mushrooms. These accounts are not subject to analysis; instead they are presented as verbatim essays that detail experiences for the interest of readers. A similar presentation of reports from third parties about their magic mushroom experiences (similarly unanalysed) is undertaken by Wojtowicz (2008). He uses a selection of vignettes to validate the proposition that some people report the experience of encountering entities when using mushrooms. These accounts were drawn from the online user-generated database of anonymously uploaded personal trip reports *Erowid* (<http://www.erowid.org>). *Erowid* is the largest database of this kind, where over 2300 user-generated details of psilocybin mushroom trip experiences from around the (English speaking) world are stored, separated into categories such as 'First Time' 'Glowing' and 'Difficult Experiences'. Presently there has been no systematic analysis of magic mushroom trip reports posted on *Erowid*.

2.4.3 Academic Interest in the Claims of the Psychonauts

In the last decade academics in the fields of psychology, anthropology and sociology have become interested in the claims of psychonauts like McKenna and have attempted to assess the credibility and possibilities of researching the nature and existence of entities and alternate realities. Broadly this research can be separated into those sympathetic to the writings of psychonauts such as McKenna and the possibility that there is 'something more' to entity encounters and the visions of other dimensions mushrooms occasion, and the counter view that these experiences reflect complex hallucinations and neurological epiphenomena.

Luke (2008) argues for a consideration of the possibility that entities and other realities may exist. He acknowledges that academically exploring the potential reality of entities and metaphysical worlds is problematic, as the only way to encounter them is through one's own subjectivity. This carries with it an incumbent problem of phenomenology as a form of knowledge; our subjective experiences are inaccessible to observers. In spite of this limitation, Luke (2008) compares his own psychonautic experiences with those of other people (taken from *Erowid* and his survey and interview work about paranormal psychedelic experiences) and he argues that there is striking commonality between the experiences disparate people report. Furthermore, he argues that these experiences also bear resemblance to the demons and minor deities reported in cultures separated by historical periods and geographical distances (citing similarities in Hebraic and Tibetan mythologies). Luke does not argue that entities exist in a physical sense per se, but instead asks researchers to consider that they have existence as more than neurological epiphenomena. Key to Luke's argument is that neither a psychobiological reductionist account, nor one which accepts entities as '*independently sentient discarnate entities (whatever that may be)*' (pg. 6) can adequately explain the experience. As such he advocates that the possibility be considered that entities are something which occupy a psychic landscape 'off the map' of conventional consciousness.

Tramacchi (2006) drawing upon his ethnographic fieldwork with psychedelic users and his own experiences with *Salvia Divinorum* (a potent short acting psychedelic herb, Griffin et al 2008) argues a similar point; that entity encounters and hidden realities are beyond scientific investigation because they can only be accessed experientially. He argues that his own experiences of entity encounters have challenged his previous '*material realist sensibilities*' (pg. 93) that they exist just 'in the mind'. Tramacchi also notes the uptake of shamanistic ideas that plant-based hallucinogens can be 'plant-teachers' which have a consciousness of their own, attributing this in part to the popularity of Castaneda and McKenna. Similarly to Luke (2008), Tramacchi argues that it is not possible to claim the extent to which psychonautic entity encounters are 'real' in a material sense, but that the experience is so profound, common and over whelming that it bears greater consideration before being written off as a neurological or psychological byproduct. For Tramacchi, it may be that entities and the worlds they occupy are beyond the ability of contemporary social science to fully explain, but he argues it would be a shame if they were not explored.

Few researchers deny that some people have powerful visions of entities or other realities when consuming mushrooms. What is in dispute however is the extent to which these beings and worlds can be claimed to exist independently of the observer: as something which (metaphysically) exists outside of the mind. Alyushin (2011) claims that based upon his psychonautic experiences with psilocybin mushrooms he remains unconvinced that entities are anything other than hallucinations generated by his subjectivity. He cites anecdotal evidence that he attempted 'reality testing' when communicating with entities; asking the beings to provide him with information he does not know but which he could subsequently obtain (the solutions to complex mathematical problems). Alyushin claims the beings were unable to provide him with information he didn't already possess and as such he concluded that they were products of his mind.

Whether entities are believed to be 'real' or not, accounts such as these represent a challenge to scientific rationalism. The concepts and techniques of the scientific-materialist paradigm are unable to 'prove' whether or not these entities or metaphysical realms exist (Tramacchi 2006), as they are only accessible to subjective consciousness through direct experience. This subjective experience can present a challenge to the psychologically informed worldviews of some (but not all) social scientists consuming magic mushrooms. As Letcher (2007) argues animistic discourse (akin to the neo-shamanism advocated by psychonauts since Castaneda, Wallis 1999) resists the dominance of scientific-materialism and associated psychological conceptualizations of mushrooms, by arguing that the entities, worlds and spirits mushroom can occasion are 'real', or even 'more real' than the one of ordinary consciousness (Wasson 1974).

Despite the positive image of magic mushrooms as spiritual and neo-shamanic sacraments presented by writers such as Wasson and McKenna, in the majority of the Western world psilocybin

mushrooms are scheduled as illegal substances. Political, legislative and medical bodies do not conceptualize magic mushrooms as spiritual agents, but instead typically categorize them as dangerous ‘drugs of abuse’ and mushroom use is considered to be a social problem (Walsh 2006). As such, I shall now explore epidemiological research which both takes up and challenges this more pathological and prohibitionist understanding of magic mushrooms (Letcher 2007), as well as providing insight into the potential risks and dangers of mushroom use.

2.5 Epidemiological Research

In a departure from the previous literatures reviewed, epidemiological research does not engage with questions about the effects of magic mushrooms; instead it conceptualizes magic mushrooms and their consumption as a social or medical issue. In this regard it provides useful insight into social trends in magic mushroom consumption, particularly during periods where magic mushrooms have become more widely available due to new information or changes in their legal status (Letcher 2006). The epidemiological literature I am reviewing coincides with two key periods of magic mushroom consumption. Firstly, from the late 1970s and early 1980s when identification of the main indigenous psilocybin mushroom species in the UK (*Psilocybe Semilanceata* or ‘Liberty Cap’) lead to the first period of widespread use of wild magic mushrooms (Letcher 2006). Secondly, between 1997 and 2008 when a period of legal ambiguity allowed Dutch and UK businesses to cultivate and sell fresh psilocybin mushrooms in Great Britain and The Netherlands (Walsh 2006). During this time cultivated mushrooms also became more available in countries where they remained illegal due to trade via the internet and postal services from those countries that grew mushrooms legally (Ballesteros et al 2006).

2.5.1 Medical Case Reports

Coinciding with the first wave of magic mushroom consumption in the UK between 1978 and 1984, Accident and Emergency departments in the North of England and Scotland saw numerous admissions of people having ‘bad trips’ when experimenting with mushrooms (Letcher 2006). Hyde et al (1978) presented 3 case studies of patients admitted to hospital due to intoxication with *Psilocybe Semilanceata* (‘Liberty Caps’). The most extreme case being a 20 year old man who had consumed 20-60 mushrooms daily for one week, accompanied by fasting and sleep deprivation to evoke a ‘mystical experience’. The patient presented psychotic symptoms (fearful and aggressive behaviour, catalepsy, disordered thoughts, delusion and paranoia) for 72 hours and entered recovery 96 hours post-admission. He was released after ten days in normal mental health. The other two cases concerned men in their twenties who admitted themselves due to ‘bad trips’ and feeling out of control. Both men were discharged once the effects had abated. In all three cases people had either

experimented with friends, or sought experiences after reading about mushrooms in a book. Hyde et al concluded that after enquiry into Manchester's 'hippie subculture' magic mushroom use was well known and they describe the mushrooms and their potential effects for the benefit of other physicians.

Peden et al (1981) detail the clinical features of psilocybin mushroom ingestion, again of *Psilocybe Semilanceata* in 27 patients (age range of 12 to 24). They describe the different quantities of ingestion, the time course of intoxication, clinical features reported by patients (alteration in perception, sympathomimetic symptoms, disorientation, dilated pupils etc.) and suggest means of managing mushroom intoxicated persons (primarily observation, stomach pumping and administration of anti- psychotic and anti-anxiety medications). Peden et al conclude that observation and support is the best treatment with administration of drugs in extreme cases. Harris & Evans (1981) provide a similar case report of a 'magic mushroom festival'¹² in Wales involving a hundred young people, nineteen of whom were admitted to hospital. Their case report focuses on two patients who had 'over indulged' and were suffering the effects of a 'bad trip' following high dose ingestion. Again, Harris & Evans describe the psychological and physiological symptoms of acute ingestion, noting its similarity to effects observed in studies with synthetic psilocybin from the 1960s. Comment was made on the increasing trend of magic mushroom use, but the authors argue that the practice is largely unproblematic due to the relative ease of treatment and lack of severity of symptoms, although doctors should be prepared to deal with the 'side effects of over indulgence'.

These medical case histories conceptualise mushroom intoxication in psychiatric terms, as a short term instance of psychosis which is largely unproblematic, but occasionally requires treatment. They are also a product of their time; when a second wave of large scale magic mushroom ingestion occurred in 2002-2005 (a period of legal tolerance and sale in the UK, Walsh 2006) there were no similar publications of medical case reports. This may be due to better advice and information (e.g. from retailers, the internet, etc.) leading to fewer hospital admissions (Letcher 2006).

2.5.2 Social Harm Research

More recent epidemiological research comprises studies which assess the potential social harm impact of mushrooms. This research typically consists of reviews of existing literature, crime and hospital statistics, and the 'observation' of new trends. For example, Ballesteros et al (2006) present data from the Spanish Poison Control Centre 1991-2002; highlighting an increase in

¹² Mushroom festivals were seasonal events in the late 1970s and early 1980s coinciding with the yield of 'Liberty Cap' mushrooms in early autumn. They were strongly associated with the Free Festival and New Age Traveller movements (see Chapter 1: Introduction, 'a brief history of magic mushroom use' for details) (Letcher 2006).

psilocybin mushroom intoxication amongst young people during this period. Psilocybin mushrooms accounted for 14.4% of all calls to the poison control centre relating to fungi ingestion during the 1990s, but in 2001 and 2002 this figure increased to 30% and 54% respectively, leading the authors to estimate further widespread unreported use by those who consume mushrooms without seeking medical advice. They attribute this increase to the availability of magic mushrooms throughout Europe at that time, with legal cultivation in The Netherlands and the UK leading to illegal sale via the internet to countries where mushrooms are prohibited. They also attribute the rise in mushroom use during this period to '*the growing interest in natural foods and experimentation with less conventional sources [of drugs]*' (pg. 181), but provide no basis for this claim. The authors draw attention to the increased role of the internet, expressing concern about its use as a resource of information for users due to it being unregulated with no independent assessment of accuracy. They recommend public health initiatives to better inform the public. Ballesteros et al present magic mushroom intoxication as a clinical problem which requires treatment via talking cures (stomach pumping is advised against), and as a social issue requiring the attention of legal and forensic bodies. The tone of their report is pathological and prohibitionist (Letcher 2007), as they declare mushroom use to be a 'substance abuse' problem and social ill.

In contrast, Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink (2011) conducted a review of the harm potential of psilocybin mushrooms in 2007 at the bequest of the Dutch government. Their report involved a review of research literature, media reports and crime and hospital statistics. They argue that evidence suggests magic mushrooms pose no significant threat to physical or psychological health, with adverse reactions being typically mild and transient and the substance having no potential for dependence. However, consuming mushrooms may pose a risk to those with psychiatric disorders and in a minority of cases have been implicated in accidental deaths. It is difficult to accurately assess fatalities attributable to mushroom intoxication due to the absence of toxicological data, the confounding effects of polydrug consumption, and media sensationalism misattributing psilocybin use in cases where it was not present. The authors conclude that based on their analysis of research literature, crime figures and hospital admissions relevant to mushroom use, that magic mushrooms pose no significant threat to physical or psychological health, public order, or criminality. They concede that infrequent fatal accidents can occur whilst people are intoxicated, and the authors recommend the provision of harm reduction information (e.g. surveillance by a sober party) to avoid accidents. In spite of their recommendations that psilocybin is a relatively 'safe' substance for public consumption, The Netherlands banned psilocybin mushrooms in 2008.

Epidemiological research is typically conducted in a 'top down' fashion and is often only instigated during periods of increased social or political awareness of magic mushroom use. Statistical data is obtained from public health bodies, or existing research is reviewed and applied to the social world. When mushroom users become the object of epidemiological research it is as medical case studies.

Epidemiological research therefore overlooks the perspective of users themselves; the motivations, attitudes, constructions and meanings behind magic mushroom use in the social world. Other social research has explored mushroom use in everyday social and cultural contexts from the perspective of users and takes the form of surveys, qualitative interviews and focus-groups.

2.6 Social Research with Magic Mushroom Users

2.6.1 Survey Research with Magic Mushroom Users

Survey research with magic mushroom users tends to assess practices and attitudes to magic mushroom consumption, and explores the conclusions of experimental studies in a more 'ecologically valid' context. This is a fairly limited literature, and typically surveys are conducted which more generally address psychedelic or hallucinogenic drugs as a class of substances, rather than magic mushrooms specifically (e.g. McCambridge et al 2005). I shall focus upon results relevant to psilocybin mushroom use for the purposes of this review.

An example of survey research used to investigate the findings of experimental studies is that conducted by Cummins & Lyke (2013). They used a questionnaire study to investigate the potential of psilocybin to occasion 'peak experiences'; instances of ecstasy, awe, and transcendence (similar to 'mystical' experiences but informed by humanist psychology). The rationale was to address problems of ecological validity in laboratory studies of psilocybin-occasioned mystical experience (e.g. Griffiths et al 2006), where mystical experiences are primarily attributed to psilocybin's neurobiological action. The authors argue that this attribution is mistaken if the effect can only be obtained in laboratory conditions. They administered a two part online questionnaire gathering data on psilocybin use/abstention, asking participants to recall a 'peak' experience and to complete the Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) measure (Dittrich 1998) in light of this experience. Participants were divided into three groups; psilocybin non-users (63), psilocybin users reporting a 'peak' experience during use (16) and psilocybin users not reporting a 'peak' experience during use (18). Results support the claim that psilocybin can occasion meaningful transcendent experiences in naturalistic settings, but indicate that a lower proportion of psilocybin users attributed their peak experience to psilocybin (47%) than those in experimental studies (61%). The authors attribute this to sampling bias in Griffiths et al (2006) study which recruited only 'spiritually active' participants and the role of 'set and setting' variables which are not consistent in naturalistic settings. They conclude that caution is needed when applying laboratory results to real world contexts and propose that further researcher is needed into the contextual factors that may affect peak experiences with psychedelics.

More general research into users' perceptions of psychedelics was conducted by Carhart-Harris & Nutt (2010) who used a self-report web-based questionnaire to investigate users' perceptions of the benefits and harms of using classical hallucinogens (LSD and psilocybin). Rating scales and open questions were used to investigate perceived drug effects, benefits and harms, psychoanalytic phenomena and mystical experiences. Of the sample obtained 503 participants reported using psilocybin mushrooms. Results indicated that a majority considered mushrooms to have a positive effect on long term well-being (60%), with some participants reporting that they alleviated mental or physical health problems. Reported benefits of psilocybin mushroom use included improved insight, perspective, wellbeing, inner peace, optimism, self-acceptance, greater appreciation of nature and increased spirituality. In contrast, a minority reported psilocybin negatively affected wellbeing (2.4%) and worsened mental and physical health problems. Reported potential harms of psilocybin mushrooms included increased anxiety, psychotic symptoms, derealisation, disconnection from reality and mania. Responding to questions relevant to psychoanalytic theory 93% of respondents felt psychedelics allowed access to the unconscious mind, with psilocybin rated the second most likely substance to facilitate access. Concerning mystical experience 25% of respondents who reported mystical experiences when using psychedelics rated psilocybin mushrooms the most likely to occasion them. Carhart-Harris & Nutt (2010) conclude that their results indicate a largely positive representation of classical hallucinogens (LSD and psilocybin) as primarily beneficial. Harm from ingestion is subclinical and rare and risks can be reduced if ingestion is moderate and infrequent. They argue that the present illegality of hallucinogens based on assumptions they are 'dangerous drugs' is questionable and that the therapeutic potential and role of hallucinogens as a research tool should be reconsidered in light of their data. Although their research agenda aimed to provide supportive evidence justifying the resumption of experimental psilocybin research in the UK, the study provides important data about the perceived harms and benefits of psilocybin ingestion from users in the social world.

A survey which addresses magic mushroom use exclusively was conducted by Hallock et al (2013) at a United States university. The aim of this research was to survey users about their current patterns of mushroom consumption, reasons for experimentation and both their and non-users perceptions of mushrooms potential for abuse and addictiveness. Hallock et al surveyed 409 participants, of which 117 had consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms. Hallock et al found that mushroom users engaged in infrequent but intense use of mushrooms and reported their experiences to be positive. Mushrooms were typically obtained from friends and dealers, with cultivation and picking being minority activities. Frequent reasons for consuming mushrooms were 'curiosity', 'to achieve a mystical experience' and 'introspection'. Non-users viewed mushrooms as socially and personally harmful and potentially addictive, whilst users viewed them as benign. Mushroom users were more likely to have consumed other drugs (excluding marijuana and alcohol) than non-users.

Hallock et al conclude that magic mushrooms are one of a range of recreational drugs consumed by a minority of persons who are likely to experiment with illicit substances generally, but note that reasons provided for use are more spiritual than recreational. This study shows divergence in knowledge and opinion between users and non-users, suggesting that a public perception of mushrooms as dangerous drugs may be prevalent. Whilst survey research may enable questioning a large sample of users about their mushroom use, it does not enable exploration of the meanings of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion in-depth. For that, interview and focus group research is conducted.

2.6.2 Interview and Focus-Group Research with Magic Mushroom Users

Qualitative exploratory research with mushroom users is a small literature and is closest in method and rationale to the research conducted in the present thesis. A mixed method study combining surveys and focus groups was conducted by Riley & Blackman (2008), recruiting magic mushroom users in Bristol and Edinburgh in 2004. This research was conducted during a period of legally tolerated sale of fresh magic mushrooms between 2002 and 2005, allowing the authors to recruit participants at 'Head Shops' which sold magic mushrooms and through a local drug advisory charity which provided harm minimisation advice. The aim was to explore rationales for, and patterns of, use at a novel time when magic mushroom consumption in the UK had become more widespread. Riley & Blackman (2008) surveyed 174 participants (110 male, 64 female, ages 14-48) using a questionnaire concerning patterns of mushroom use (amount consumed, frequency of consumption, how obtained, planning, preparation and place of use), reasons for and pleasures of mushroom use (reasons for use, positive experiences) and risks and relationship with other drugs (negative experiences and co-morbid substance use). Four focus groups (20 participants, 13 male, 7 female, ages 16-24) were also conducted with participants who completed the questionnaire, and data was subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Riley & Blackman (2008) found non-marginalised (the majority were in education or employed) young adults who did not represent a pathological minority engaging in infrequent but intense mushroom use. Participants bought, picked and gifted mushrooms, had a relaxed but considered attitude to their preparation for use, and mushroom consumption was located in a wider discourse of normalised polydrug use and calculated hedonism (although few participants consumed other hallucinogens, e.g. LSD). Mushrooms were primarily consumed for social and recreational reasons; laughter and the 'visuals' (perceptual disturbances) they can occasion. A key finding was participants' self-reported spiritual use of mushrooms, undertaken to feel closer connections with other people and the natural world. This suggests some overlap between spiritual and recreational reasons for use. Reported negative experiences were identified as fairly common, but of low risk.

The authors also found that legality and the ability to purchase mushrooms from reputable vendors affected participants' decision to use mushrooms; several participants reported that had mushroom been prohibited they would not have obtained and tried them. Riley & Blackman (2008) state that the lapse in prohibition of mushrooms provided a unique opportunity to study the phenomena, and conclude that magic mushrooms do not warrant their current scheduled status as a Class A substance, due to minimal harm and participants reports of beneficial recreational and spiritual use.

Building upon this research, Riley, Thompson, & Griffin (2010)¹³ conducted a discourse analysis of the focus group data obtained in 2004 by during the period of legal tolerance and open sale of magic mushrooms in Britain (original data obtained by Riley & Blackman 2008). The rationale was to explore the impact of the open commercial sale of magic mushrooms upon users' understandings and to explore its implications for practices of drug use, consumption and citizenship. The researchers sought to explore the negotiation of seemingly antithetical discourses in magic mushroom users' constructions of meaning; those of contemporary drug use and historical psychedelic philosophy. Contemporary drug discourse (partly informed by UK drug policy) is couched in 'neo-liberal' understandings of drug use as a governmental practice of the self; constituting it as a consumer choice, an individual freedom which requires users to engage in appropriate 'controlled use' (as opposed to unrestrained 'misuse'), and as a recreational leisure activity. In contrast the traditional psychedelic discourse of the 1960s counter-culture constituted psychedelic substance use as facilitating a rejection of dominant social values, and encouraging spiritual collectivism, exemplified by Leary's slogan 'turn on, tune in, drop out'.

Riley, Thompson & Griffin (2010) conducted a synthesised discourse analysis incorporating elements from discursive psychology, discourse analysis, and Foucauldian conceptions of discourse. They identified two key overarching discourses from participants' talk, each comprised of three interpretive repertoires. These discourses were 'neo-liberal' and 'post-psychedelic'. Repertoires comprising neo-liberal discourse included '*the right to exercise personal freedom*'; where mushroom consumption was constructed as a rational and legitimate individual choice, but one which required guidance from professionals, '*controlled consumption is appropriate consumption*'; the uptake of neo-liberal understanding that subjects are responsible for their own self-management, positioning drug 'misuse' as an individual failing, and excessive but controlled use as acceptable. Lastly, '*economic citizens*'; where participants linked controlled use with economic participation, constructing mushrooms as a leisure activity restricted to times and places where it should not interfere with paid work or study. Using this discourse, participants constructed

¹³ I would like to illustrate that although I was an author of this paper, it involved secondary data analysis of focus group data obtained in 2004 by Riley & Blackman. This paper therefore involves a separate and different data set and style of analysis to the one generated and undertaken in the present thesis.

magic mushroom use as '*congruent with responsible citizenship*' (pg. 449) if undertaken in a controlled and economically responsible way.

Post-psychedelic discourse was provided as a counter point to neo-liberalism and represents the modification and remnants of 1960s psychedelic philosophy in the 21st century. This discourse was comprised of repertoires including '*revelation of connectedness*'; where users construct mushrooms as revealing a sense of connection with other people and the natural world facilitating meaningfulness, and '*reverence for mushrooms*'; where mushroom use was constructed as a '*spiritual activity of the ancient past*' (pg. 449) undertaken by ancestors. This repertoire also included a desire to return to this reverent use of mushrooms, but was tempered by pessimistic constructions that this is irrevocably lost. Lastly, '*hippies as a distanced ideal*'; a repertoire wherein participants constructed 'hippies' as idealised figures associated with spiritual and unifying uses of mushrooms, but also as an unappealing identity to be strongly rejected when applied to themselves. This discourse enabled the construction of magic mushroom use as a spiritual and potentially connective activity, but one which is more appropriate to the past.

Despite the potential for post-psychedelic discourse to challenge neo-liberal discourse, the authors argue that this was not manifest in participants' accounts. Participants' rejection of any association with 'hippies', inability to imagine contemporary collectivised spiritual use beyond small groups of friends, and adherence to the need for mushrooms to be used in a way that maintains economic citizenry, demonstrate that post-psychedelic discourse is contained within neo-liberal discourse. The benefit of this is the uptake of harm minimisation (controlled and considered use), but what is lost is the counter-cultural potential of psychedelics. The authors conclude that within understandings of contemporary mushroom use it is possible to temporarily 'turn on and tune in' (to take mushrooms as a leisure activity which does not affect economic participation), but that the dominance of neo-liberal governance renders 'dropping out' (and associated collectivist spiritual use of mushrooms) unthinkable.

Both of the above studies use data obtained during a period of legal tolerance and sale of magic mushrooms as purchasable commodities. This removes any potential construction of 'criminality' from accounts which is advantageous in understanding consumptive citizenship (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010). However, this also potentially limits the applicability of the findings to the current era, where psilocybin mushrooms have become harder to obtain as they are no longer a legitimate commodity and are scheduled as a Class A substance in all forms (Walsh 2006)¹⁴.

¹⁴ Whilst the impact of criminalisation is not the focus of this thesis, the data and subsequent findings have been generated from current users who are making meaning of mushrooms in a post-criminalisation context in the UK.

Similar research conducted with magic mushroom users during the early 2000s has been undertaken in France; a country which has not enjoyed a period of sale and tolerance, but one where psilocybin mushrooms became more widely available between 2002-2008 due to the prevalence of commercial mushroom growing in the UK and The Netherlands. Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiou, & Zoll (2009) conducted a qualitative study to explore contemporary uses of 'natural hallucinogens'; psychedelic plants and fungi. The researchers conducted 30 in-depth interviews (18 male, 12 female, mean age 25) with regular natural hallucinogen users (6 instances of use in the last 12 months) between 2004 and 2005. They categorise users into 3 types; poly-abusers (22, who use a variety of drugs in a range of settings), hedonists (3, who use cocaine, alcohol, cannabis and natural hallucinogens), and purists (5, who use natural hallucinogens, cannabis and alcohol). The authors attribute an increase in consumption of natural hallucinogens in the early 2000s to three factors; the rise of the Techno-rave scene in France, increased interest in 'neo-shamanism'¹⁵, and the latent influence of 1960s psychedelia. Whilst they gathered data for a number of substances (datura, N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), salvia, and ayahuasca) for the purposes of this review I have focused upon their findings relevant to psilocybin mushrooms.

All participants had used magic mushrooms in the past 12 months, either having picked European varieties, or having purchased or grown imported cultivated mushrooms known by their geographical association (Mexican or Thai mushrooms). Mushrooms were not obtained through criminal 'drug dealing' networks, but were instead picked, shared or sold peer to peer, or purchased from the internet. Participants reported taking doses from moderate to large and consumed mushrooms in a variety of ways (in tea, dried or fresh etc.). Participants described the typical array of expected somatic and euphoric effects of psilocybin mushrooms (perceptual disturbance, laughter, wonder, hallucination, and visionary or otherworldly experiences at high doses), as well as the typically reported negative effects (e.g. fear, panic, disturbing hallucinations, and a sense of loss of control).

The researchers categorise participants' reasons for use into three flexible and non-exclusive typologies. Firstly, *enchantment*; which is associated with 'fun'; enabling social and festive emulation in friendship groups and at dance based leisure events, enhancing enjoyment of time spent with others, increasing joyous closeness with nature and as providing pleasing novelty through experiences occasioned. Secondly, *disorientation*; which is more subjective and less social and involves enjoyment of novel and contemplative alterations to a user's perceived physical and psychological reality, normally when on one's own or in a small group. Lastly *visionary*; which is associated with neo-shamanism and categorises mushrooms as enabling access to hidden

¹⁵ A spiritual philosophy inspired by writers like Castaneda (1968) which advocates the use of natural hallucinogens to facilitate closeness with nature, unity in the self, to experience metaphysical realities, and to access hidden intuitive knowledge (Wallis 1999).

knowledge, as facilitating the perception of typically invisible parallel metaphysical worlds populated by sentient entities and which represents mushrooms as agentic beings which communicate mystically with users.

The authors assert that of the substances researched magic mushrooms were the most associated with the Techno scene and hedonistic polydrug consumption taken with other substances strategically for 'fun'. The most commonly reported reasons for use were festive enjoyment (*enchantment* and *disorientation*). The authors argue that this undermines assumptions made by other researchers that the use of natural hallucinogens is associated with ecological concerns, or a mistrust of synthetic substances (e.g. ecstasy and LSD); instead mushroom consumption is primarily fuelled by the desire for a 'better high'. However, they argue a growing minority of users are motivated by neo-shamanic concerns, often migrating from festive use (*enchancing* and *disorienting*) to neo-shamanic (*visionary*) use. This occurs through direct experience of unusual phenomena and subsequent reading of popular literature which associates psychedelics with neo-shamanic spirituality (e.g. Castaneda 1968). Neo-shamanism is not the same as indigenous Mesoamerican spiritualities', but is a Westernised phenomenon linked to philosophies espoused by popular psychedelic writers since Castaneda (1968). Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiou, & Zoll (2009) predict that neo-shamanic understandings of natural hallucinogens will increase due to the association between festive and visionary use and as it serves to legitimise the use of psychedelic plants and fungi as a contemporary spiritual practice for developing oneself and attaining hidden knowledge.

Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt (2011) subsequently published a revised consideration of the study and its results in a book chapter developing further conclusions. They argue that there is a greater cross over than previously assumed between the Techno scene and neo-shamanic ideas, with the former incorporating aspects of the later into its aesthetic and musical genres¹⁶. They also add the subsequent observation that counter-cultural understandings of psychedelics prevalent to the 1960s were absent from their sample (a conclusion similar to findings of Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010). They note that the hedonistic use of mushrooms is undertaken within prevailing social norms and understandings, rather than challenging them. The lack of 'revolutionary doctrine' in psychedelics use, particularly in the Techno scene is something they attribute to present day social values being couched in 'pleasure citizenry' (Riley, Morey & Griffin 2010); an aspect of late modern society where people are constructed as free to engage in consumptive acts of meaningful pleasure. As such, natural hallucinogen use is subsumed within mainstream cultural values and is robbed of the revolutionary potential it embodied in the 1960s. Similarly, they argue that some of the goals of neo-shamanism are aligned with late modern expectations that citizens develop

¹⁶ For a more detailed consideration of this phenomenon in the UK PsyTrance scene; see St John (2009).

themselves through introspective practices and are responsible for seeking personalised spiritual meaning.

Whilst interesting, Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt's (2011) conclusions must however be criticised. Firstly they lack empirical rigour; many of the conclusions they draw are not explored in any detail by specific data analysis but are instead presented as general observations from the data. Secondly, their study is limited by a lack of theoretical rigor; whilst presenting an ostensibly constructionist argument they do not clearly state their theoretical or analytic focus in the chapter. In spite of these limitations however, their findings provide an interesting set of considerations for further empirical exploration such as in the present thesis, which seeks to contribute to the qualitative social research exploring the possible meanings of magic mushrooms from users' perspectives.

2.7 Summary: Literature Review

In this chapter I presented the argument that magic mushrooms have been constituted through a number of different discourses across in the nearly 60 years since their discovery (Letcher 2007). Letcher (2007) groups these discourses into those utilised by institutions and those developed by users. Official discourses are those of the medical-scientific, political and legal establishments, including *pathological* (constituting mushrooms as 'poisonous'), *prohibitionist* (categorising mushrooms as 'dangerous drugs') and *psychological* (constructing psilocybin as a research and therapeutic tool) discourses. 'Resistive' discourses are those generated by users: *recreational* (mushrooms are for 'fun'), *psychedelic* (constructing mushrooms as 'mind-manifesting' agents which enhance creativity), *entheogenic* (as spiritual sacraments which occasion the 'divine within') and *animistic* (as enabling encounters with discarnate entities and nature spirits).

The diverse, varied and competing ways which magic mushrooms have been conceptualised are reflected in the multiple research literatures which have engaged with magic mushrooms. I identified and reviewed five key research literatures which have attempted to investigate or explore magic mushrooms, the psychoactive chemicals within them (notably psilocybin), the experiences they can occasion and how meaning is made of these experiences. I shall now briefly summarise these literatures. The first two literatures reviewed in this chapter do not engage with magic mushrooms, but instead employ synthetic psilocybin; the psychoactive active ingredient found in magic mushrooms. The dominant discipline of research with psilocybin is the *psychopharmacological* approach, which uses placebo-control trials in clinical and laboratory settings to investigate the subjective effects of psilocybin, as well as its underlying neurobiological and psychopharmacological mechanisms of action (Langlitz 2010). Within this approach, psilocybin is also used as a research tool for investigating neurological functioning and for occasioning experimental mysticism, with the goal of developing psilocybin as a potential

therapeutic agent. An alternative approach utilising psilocybin is *psychedelic* research. Conducted during the 1960s this approach sought to explore the ‘set & setting’ hypothesis: that psychedelic experiences are shaped by psychological and environmental context, rather than psychopharmacology. This approach’s use of a ‘social methodology’ (where psilocybin was consumed in social settings) and associations with the contemporary counter-culture, lead to it being short-lived and contributed to the international criminalisation of psilocybin in 1971 (Wark & Galliher 2010). Associations between psychedelic researchers and the contemporary counter-culture also contributed to an understanding of psychedelic substances as facilitating social-revolution, enabling people to ‘turn on, tune in and drop out’.

The three remaining literatures I reviewed in this chapter concern magic mushroom use directly, rather than psilocybin in an abstracted form. The first of these was *auto-ethnographic* research, a populist literature based upon writers’ and researchers personal experiences with psilocybin mushrooms. The auto-ethnographic research reviewed in this chapter conceptualises magic mushrooms as ‘entheogens’ which occasion mystical experiences, or as enabling neo-shamanic states of consciousness. Neo-shamanic understandings of magic mushrooms propose that they allow the user to perceive metaphysical realities, encounter discarnate entities, communicate with the mushroom as a conscious being and attain hidden knowledge of natural and spiritual worlds. Debate continues as to whether these metaphysical realities are ‘real’. The next research approach reviewed was *epidemiological* research, which conceptualises magic mushroom use as a potential social problem and attempts to provide information for medical and legal bodies to address this, through review of public health data, existing literature and medical case reports. Lastly, I reviewed *social* research, which explores the meanings of magic mushrooms from users’ perspectives through the use of surveys, interviews and focus groups. This final research literature is the one in which the current thesis is situated: seeking to explore the meanings made of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion by current users in the present era.

Each of the literatures reviewed above offers insight into aspects of psilocybin mushrooms and what they may mean, but each is also located within a particular epistemological and ontological paradigm. Having established and reviewed the findings and approaches within these research literatures relevant to magic mushrooms, it is now necessary to consider the theoretical issues presented by these differing approaches. In the next chapter I shall engage with these theoretical issues and establish the rationale for the theoretical orientation of the current thesis (social constructionism, utilising a form of Foucauldian approach to discourse) and its appropriateness for exploring how magic mushroom users construct meanings around magic mushrooms, in the contemporary social world.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Considerations

In the previous chapter I identified several research literatures, each of which has separately attempted to explore and investigate magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. The disparateness of these literatures indicates that there is no coherent theoretical approach to conceptualising magic mushrooms; instead there are a variety of epistemological orientations and theoretical assumptions incumbent to each literature which has engaged with psilocybin mushrooms. In this chapter I address the theoretical assumptions which inform the various research literatures. Firstly, I engage with the dominant theoretical orientation in psychedelics research: that of psychopharmacological realism. I shall then present an alternative epistemological orientation based upon social constructionism and a form of Foucauldian informed discourse. In doing so I establish the theoretical framework underlying this thesis, as well as outlining the orientation taken to understanding how people form and negotiate the meaning of magic mushrooms in the social world.

3.1 Epistemological Approaches and Magic Mushroom Experiences as ‘Nexus’

Drug experiences are ‘liminal’ in nature and involve a complex interaction of chemicals on the body, the experience of subjective effects to an individual, and how the experiences they occasion are interpreted, represented, and made meaningful in micro and macro socio-cultural contexts (Vayne 2006, Letcher 2007). Vayne (2006) argues that it is therefore best to think of drug experiences as a ‘nexus’; an inseparable coalescence and interaction of the material-biological, experiential, and symbolic-cultural which cannot be readily disentangled.

Whilst conceptualising drug experience as a ‘nexus’ is a reasonable description of the phenomenon, it is hard to apply in empirical research. Social and natural science research typically dissects this ‘nexus’ into its component domains; usually the material-biological and the symbolic-cultural. Which domain of the ‘nexus’ becomes the focus of academic research with psilocybin mushrooms is based upon the epistemological orientation of the discipline in question. By splitting the ‘nexus’ into domains a dichotomy is often constructed between ‘material realities’ (substances, neurological structures, etc.) and ‘symbolic realities’ (discourses, cultural representations, etc.) (Pujol & Montenegro 1999). The dichotomy between ‘material reality’ and ‘symbolic reality’ in social science research (beyond drug research) has been referred to as one of essentialism versus constructionism (Blackman 2001) or the realism/relativism debate (Parker 1998)¹⁷.

¹⁷ Due to the range of approaches within this debate it is more appropriate to talk of ‘realisms’ and ‘relativisms’ than to present each as a singular unitary position, however the cluster of approaches in either polarity (e.g. realism) do share certain epistemological and ontological perspectives (Burr 2003).

As Blackman (2001) suggests the dualism of essentialism versus constructionism, or realism/relativism, presents a choice of two ‘unhappy alternatives’ in theorisation; an either/or dichotomy. Both polarities can potentially lend themselves to determinism in the making sense of experiences. In the context of academic research into magic mushroom experiences and their meanings, the material/realist side of the dichotomy emphasises the biological ‘underpinnings’ of brain and chemical interactions as paramount in generating experiences with psilocybin (Langlitz 2012). This typifies much psychopharmacological research with psilocybin; the use of an experimental design and neurological orientation mean that the effects of psilocybin are conceptualised as a function of biology; a product of the chemical interaction between brain and substance. Any variation in experiences between persons is attributed to subjective (mis)interpretation of a neurological event and the potential role of socio-cultural factors in the shaping of psychedelic experiences tends to be disregarded (Langlitz 2010, 2012).

Alternatively, over-prioritising the socio-cultural side of the dualism can potentially marginalise the role of the biological in psychedelic drug experiences (Shanon 2002a). This can lead to the meanings made of magic mushrooms being conceptualised as exclusively a function of culture. Langlitz (2012) argues that in cultural anthropology there has been a historical tendency to ignore psychopharmacology, with some researchers focusing upon the role of psychedelics in indigenous cultures as ‘symbols’ divorced from their psychoactive effects. For example Meyerhoff (1974) treated the hallucinogen peyote as a ‘symbol’ in the Huichol culture, where it is used as a religious sacrament. Meyerhoff disregarded the psychoactive effects of peyote as a psychedelic substance; it is a cactus which contains the active compound Mescaline and can profoundly alter perception of self and reality, intensify emotions and occasion transcendental states (Halpern et al 2005). Meyerhoff (1974) instead asserted that peyote simply elicits a ‘rewarding ecstatic experience,’ akin to those that other cultures obtain from ritual dancing and drumming. She therefore argued that the Huichol Indians imbue peyote with religious and sacramental significance by applying a cosmology to it as a symbol (as they do with the crop maize), irrespective of its psychoactive effects.

This theorisation neutralises the specificity of experiences the substance can occasion, which other researchers argue strongly influences the formation and expression of the cultural tropes in which the substance becomes embedded. For example, Furst (1976) and Shanon (2002b) argue that there is commonality in the cosmologies of tribes who use the psychedelic ayahuasca¹⁸ as a result of its more consistent psychoactive properties. Whilst there can be enormous cultural variability in the

¹⁸ Ayahuasca is a powerful psychedelic plant infusion brewed using the vine *Banisteriopsis Caapi* and N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) rich leaves of various Amazonian shrubs. It is used by various indigenous tribes in South American for divinatory and healing practices (Shanon 2002b).

way a hallucinogen experience can be conceptualised, it still elicits a (highly flexible) quality of experience based upon its biological action (Shanon 2002a, b). Taking the example of magic mushrooms, whether a trip is understood as good or bad, recreational or mystical, it is still recognisable as falling within the parameters of how psilocybin is thought to act as a psychedelic substance. As such, mushroom ingestion could not be confused with the ingestion of dissimilar substances such as alcohol or cocaine.

It would be disingenuous to say that research approaches to psychedelic drugs adhere to one or the other side of the dualism dogmatically; material and symbolic ‘realities’ are often viewed as separate yet interactional and a hierarchical approach is taken as to what is emphasised as most crucial to the occasioning of experiences (Burkitt 1999). For example, in the ‘psychedelic approach’ to psilocybin research (see Chapter 2) both the psychedelic substance (material), and the symbolic factors of ‘set’ (an individual’s psychological state) and ‘setting’ (their environmental context) are considered necessary to occasion psilocybin experiences (Leary, Metzner, & Allpert 1964). However, the biological action of psilocybin (material) is treated as subordinate to the effects of ‘set and setting’ (symbolic) in determining the nature of experiences. Whether one experiences awe or terror, mysticism or enjoyment, is conceptualised as a matter of ‘correct’ set and setting; the substance merely provides the conditions of consciousness for the symbolic factors to act (Leary, Metzner, & Allpert 1964). When considering epistemology in research with psychedelic drugs the issue is more where theoretical focus lies and what is emphasised and negated as central to occasioning experience and meaning, rather than seeing any approach as exclusively dogmatic (Langlitz 2010).

Several researchers have called for more integrated approaches to researching psychedelics, which attempt to accommodate both the neurobiological understandings of substances as psychoactive chemicals, and the socio-cultural factors which shape how the ‘pharmacological event’ (Roberts 2008) of ingesting the substance is understood and made meaningful (Langlitz 2010, Furst 1976, Letcher 2013). In this regard a ‘both/and’ approach to psychedelics research is considered valuable. Whilst a ‘both/and’ approach is desirable it is also difficult, as epistemological and ontological assumptions of research approaches tend to favour a side of the material/symbolic duality described above and communication between approaches is seldom conducted. In the present thesis I shall not attempt a both/and approach to researching the meaning of magic mushrooms. Instead, I hope to demonstrate that although my approach is weighted more to the socio-cultural side of the dualism, this need not negate the material factors of magic mushroom use and that it is possible contribute to the research literature and epistemological debate without sliding into socio-cultural determinism.

Firstly however, it is necessary to consider the theoretical approach which predominates in drug research (Martin & Stenner 2004); that of realist epistemology. By considering this in the context of magic mushroom research I hope to address the ‘common sense’ assumption that drug experiences are primarily elicited as a function of pharmacology, as well as considering the role of the material polarity of the dichotomy described above in my own work. Once I have established and critiqued realist epistemology I shall then elaborate and justify the theoretical orientation of the current thesis; social constructionism and a form of Foucauldian discourse.

3.2 ‘Realist Epistemologies’ and Magic Mushrooms

Realist epistemologies are approaches to social science which share the philosophical assumption that there is a singular ontological ‘reality’ populated by objects, structures, and events which exists both prior to, and independently of, our beliefs about it, and which we are able to garner truthful or objective knowledge about (Edley 2001, Liebrucks 2001, Nightingale & Cromby 2002). Our consciousness, experiences, research practices and language are processes through which we perceive and interpret this reality; they ‘open up’ reality to us (Collier 1998). Whilst our perceptions of this reality may not be accurate, or may be discrepant between persons, according to a realist perspective our perceptions are considered to be of a common world which exists independently of us (Liebrucks 2001). The contention is that there is a ‘real’ world containing objects, structures and events, which has an objective ontological existence and which can be rendered knowable (measured and categorised via) technologies of knowledge (Edley 2001).

In research with magic mushrooms this orientation leads to the conception that experiences are grounded in a common ‘intransitive’ (unaffected by our perceptions of it; Bhaskar 1989) material or phenomenological world; they exist as properties or attributes of ingesting magic mushrooms, which can be rendered knowable. The dominant ‘realist’ epistemology in magic mushroom research is ‘psychopharmacological realism’; which takes neurobiology as the intransitive material world from which magic mushroom experiences stem (Langlitz 2012). This approach is representative of the ‘materialist/biological’ side of the dualism described above, and informs both laboratory research with psilocybin and broader understandings of the origins of psilocybin mushroom experiences.

3.2.1 Psychopharmacological Realism

‘Psychopharmacological realism’ is the epistemological orientation which asserts that it is possible to garner ‘truthful’ knowledge about psilocybin mushrooms by investigating the neurobiological mechanisms of the chemicals within them. Magic mushrooms are conceptualised as objects which contain the psychoactive substances psilocybin and psilocin (Hoffman et al 1959). Once

mushrooms are consumed these psychoactive chemicals within the fungi are metabolised, and then interact with, and exert a physiological effect on, the brain. Psilocybin and psilocin are serotonin agonists, they bind to specific receptors (5HT1A and 5HT2A, Passie et al 2002) in particular cortices in the brain and this binding produces *'decreased activity and connectivity in the brain's key connector hubs, enabling a state of unconstrained cognition'* (Carhart-Harris et al 2012, pg. 2141). The argument follows that this pharmacologically induced state of 'unconstrained cognition' correlates with the subjective experiences of the person consuming the substance (Vollenweider et al 1998). These manifest as a particular range of somatosensory, psychological, affective, perceptual and cognitive 'effects' (Hasler et al 2004). The range of potential 'effects' that psilocybin can occasion is varied but 'bounded' (Shanon 2002a) by the physical nature of chemical structures in the mushroom and the brain and how they interact. For example, a person ingesting magic mushrooms is unlikely to confuse their experience with the ingestion of cocaine, as this substance has a different chemical structure and related pattern of neurochemical interaction, and therefore occasions different 'effects'. Returning to magic mushrooms the 'bounded' range of psycho-physiological 'effects' they elicit are treated as a set of discrete phenomena which is occasioned by the neuro-chemical action of psilocybin. As such, these effects are conceptualised as 'real', discernible, aspects of psilocybin occasioned experiences which can be measured and categorised.

For example the key psychometric tool used to determine the nature of psilocybin experiences is the Altered States of Consciousness Questionnaire (ASC Scale), which categorises psychedelic experiences based upon three criteria; 'oceanic boundlessness' (a sense of transcendent oneness with the universe and positive loss of self), 'anxiety of ego dissolution' (negative or fearful loss of ego or self) and 'visual restructuralization' (visual perceptual disturbances and hallucinations) (Dittrich 1998). Each of these axes is considered to accurately describe 'real', stable, and enduring features of an altered state of consciousness induced by a psychedelic substance. Regardless of whether this experience is understood by users as religious or entertaining, or that the specific content of the experience varies considerably across persons, the 'quality' of this experience (e.g. the dissolution of the ego or perceptual disturbances) is determined as an occasionable feature of ingestion. Scoring highly on this self-report measure is taken as indicative of having experienced an authentic altered state of consciousness. This questionnaire is deployed in the majority of psychopharmacological research with psilocybin (Langlitz 2010) as a descriptive tool which authenticates the bio-psychological events attributable to consuming the substance. It is also often used in conjunction with brain imaging research in an effort to correlate alterations to neural activity with alterations to the experience of consciousness (Vollenweider et al 1997, 1998).

Psychopharmacological realism is seemingly complicated by the role of non-pharmacological factors of ‘set’ (immediate psychological state of the user such as mood, personality and expectation) and ‘setting’ (the immediate social and environmental context the substance is taken in) (Leary et al 1963, Zinberg 1984), which can modulate people’s experiences with psychedelic substances. For example, whether one has a blissful or terrifying experience with psilocybin is thought largely attributable to ‘set and setting’ (Johnson, Richards & Griffiths 2008). Whilst the consideration of set and setting in research appears to go beyond the purely pharmacological, its treatment is still in keeping with psychopharmacological realism. ‘Set and setting’ are conceptualised as factors which influence the immediate subjective expression of a core pharmacological event, but not as altering the nature of the pharmacological event itself. For example, visual hallucinations can be subjectively experienced as both playful or menacing depending on ‘set and setting’, yet both are understood as different expressions of the same core experience of ‘visual restructuralization’ occasioned by the psychopharmacological action of psilocybin (Langlitz 2012).

Despite the complications of set and setting, psychopharmacological realism maintains that consuming psilocybin produces alterations to consciousness that are conceived of as discernible ‘phenomena’ emanating from neurophysiological and psychological mechanisms and structures, which can be objectively investigated, measured, and categorised (Langlitz 2010). In psychopharmacology the deployment of this realist understanding informs the apparatus used to investigate these experiences, namely placebo-control trials, where set and setting is held constant, possible cultural influences are ignored, and the *‘psychophysiological effect[s] of a drug [are] established by subtracting from it the effect of a pharmacologically inactive substance. Thereby, the drug effect can be attributed solely to the drug’* (Langlitz 2010, pg. 52). Psychopharmacological realism pre-supposes that through scientific investigation it is possible to discern ahistorical, stable, and culturally untainted aspects of magic mushroom experiences; as phenomena which lie beyond the methods used to discern them (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001).

An example of this can be seen in Griffiths et al (2006) investigation into psilocybin’s potential to occasion mystical experiences. The researchers conceptualised mystical experience as an ahistorical, acultural, psychological phenomenon and devised psychometric measures to categorise it. They administered these measures to participants following a placebo control trial, correlating the scores on the self-report measures of mystical experience with the administration of placebo or psilocybin both between and within participants. As psilocybin was found to readily occasion ‘mystical experiences’ (as categorised by psychometric measures) in a majority of participants in contrast to placebo, the conception that mystical experience is a psychopharmacological feature of ingesting psilocybin was considered validated (Griffiths et al 2006). As a result ‘mystical

experiences' are understood to be ahistorical, acultural, and discernible psychological phenomenon, which can be pharmacologically occasioned by psilocybin ingestion.

Following the reasoning of psychopharmacological realism, psilocybin generates categorical experiences of altered consciousness through its pharmacological action, and any cultural or subjective differences in understanding the nature of these experiences are taken to be different interpretations of a functionally similar psychopharmacological event (Langlitz 2012). At an ontological level psilocybin modulates brain function (Carhart-Harris et al 2012, Vollenweider et al 1998) and it is from this modulation that magic mushroom experiences are understood to originate. According to psychopharmacological realism the more complete the knowledge which is obtained about this neurobiological origin, the better psilocybin and its possible functions are understood.

In categorising and investigating psilocybin experiences as measurable phenomena, psychopharmacological research largely overlooks the subjective reality experienced by people consuming psilocybin (Langlitz 2010). As such, it is necessary to also consider people's subjective accounts of what they experienced. In much research with psychedelic substances which has done so a realist epistemology has also been applied to understand people's accounts of their consumption of psilocybin.

3.2.2 Realist Representation and Magic Mushrooms

Realist epistemologies typically conceptualise language and talk concerning experiences as primarily referential: as descriptive of 'things' (objects, events, concepts etc.) which exist (Nightingale & Cromby 2002). Collier (1998) argues that in realist epistemologies primacy is given to the information-giving function of language; language is perceived as indicative of things which exist independently of the speaker, and as conferring meaningful information about such things. This is not to say that there is a one to one coherence between words and world (often described as 'naive realism'); a realist account can accommodate differing 'interpretations' of a given phenomenon (Liebrucks 2001). The contention however is that though persons may produce differing accounts of a 'thing' (object, structure, event, or experience) the 'thing' in question is common to both of them and independent of their representations of it. Liebrucks (2001) uses the example of a microbiologist and a lay person examining bacteria through a microscope; both see the same bacteria but one sees organisms, the other blotches. As such, realism contends that when we speak we are to certain extents conveying information about things which exist, which we have knowledge of through consciousness and experience (Collier 1998, Nightingale & Cromby 2002). Language is seen as complex and relational to itself and the world, but all language is still fundamentally 'about' something, even in its expressive or metaphorical function, where it is used to communicate subjective states of emotion, consciousness, internal experience, and to refer to

abstraction. In realist terms language conveys information which could (theoretically) be verified (Collier 1998).

Applying this model of language to psilocybin mushrooms the argument is that when people provide accounts of their experiences they are albeit in partial, subjective, and difficult ways, communicating information about what happened in largely referential terms. Treating reports as descriptive and understanding language as referential can be seen in some auto-ethnographic, phenomenological and survey research concerning psychedelics. In auto-ethnographic accounts (e.g. Wasson 1980, McKenna 1991) language is treated as referentially communicative of experience. What is experienced when using mushrooms is understood to be 'real'; either phenomenologically (e.g. Wasson's 1980 claim that psilocybin mushrooms can occasion experiences of the divine within), or exogenously (e.g. that entities or worlds perceived when tripping with mushrooms exist independently of the observer, McKenna 1992) and accounts provided of these experiences are taken to accurately represent them. When this is extended beyond individual to multiple accounts as in phenomenological research, commonality in the way people describe psychedelic experiences is conceptualised as indicative of them reporting 'real' aspects and features of occasioned experiences. For example, in phenomenological accounts of DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine) and ayahuasca¹⁹ ingestion, individual reports of the perception of geometric shapes, the experience of oneness with surroundings, and the perception of 'discarnate entities', are collated and used to construct 'maps of the psychic topography' made accessible by consuming these substances (Luke 2011, Shanon 2002a). These 'maps' may vary slightly, but the similarities between them are seen as real features of what the experience of consuming the substance in particular contexts is like (for example Cott & Rock 2008 and Shanon 2002a constructed very similar categorical maps of DMT experience whilst working separately, cited in Luke 2011).

A further example of a realist approach to language is evident in investigation of reports of encountering 'discarnate entities' after consuming DMT. Luke (2011) outlines six categories of possible perceivable 'entity' occasioned by DMT, ranging from angels to aliens. Whilst there is subjective variation in what is reported, the underlying phenomenon, the seeing of 'discarnate entities' is considered a 'real', universal (given the right combination of pharmacological and non-pharmacological factors) and potentially verifiable experience, through comparison of accounts. The realist argument follows that people are describing the 'aboutness' of something encountered through experience (Collier 1998). There is an important categorical point to make regarding the

¹⁹ I am using these potent plant-based psychedelics as examples due to the lack of analysed phenomenological accounts of magic mushroom use in research literature. DMT is a potent short acting psychedelic compound noted for the strength of the reality-disrupting experiences it can occasion. It is typically ingested through ayahuasca brews, or smoked in pipes as extract added to the dried leaves of DMT rich herbs (Luke 2011).

term ‘real’ here; in this context ‘real’ refers to the experiential veracity of this aspect of psychedelic experiences, not necessarily the external reality of that which is experienced. That people may perceive ‘entities’ is not disputed, but whether these ‘entities’ are hallucinatory neurological epiphenomena (Shanon 2002b, Alyushin 2010), or are in some way exogenously real and possessing of an independent existence (Luke 2008, Tramacchi 2006) is debatable. A similar approach is taken to mystical experiences with mushrooms; when people describe feeling a sense of transcendent divinity the account of the experience is taken to be ‘real’, but whether these experiences stem from neurobiology or a connection with some extent higher power is debatable (Richards 2008, Smith et al 2004).

In considering accounts of psychedelic substance experiences a realist orientation to language does not enable the consideration of the origin of experiences; whether they are seen as metaphysical or neurobiological in nature is dependent upon interpretation. What this orientation to language does assert however, is that the accounts people provide of their experiences are primarily descriptive of a subjectively expressed yet commonly experienced pharmacological event, which stems from taking the drug. Whilst the focus here is upon peoples’ subjective accounts, rather than abstracted neurological measures (Luke 2008) the contention in researching magic mushrooms is still that they act in a ‘bounded’ way to occasion categorical experiences which can be investigated by examining peoples’ self-report.

In summary, realist epistemologies when applied to researching magic mushroom use conceptualise mushrooms and the chemicals they contain as psychoactive physical objects and the experiences they occasion as discrete phenomena. In the case of psychopharmacological realism, experiences are understood to primarily emanate from biochemical structures, being subjectively modulated by individual psychology and context. Experiences are considered to share common discernible features which are independent of history and culture, and which can be described in referential terms (even using metaphor) through language. The variety and function of psilocybin experiences can be made ‘knowable’ and categorised using various (psychopharmacological and phenomenological) realist research methods. In terms of the ‘material/symbolic’ dichotomy, realism typically emphasises the material elements of the ‘nexus’. In doing so however, realist epistemologies are limited when considering the meanings of magic mushrooms and it is to those limitations I now wish to attend.

3.2.3 Limitations of Psychopharmacological Realism

Psychopharmacological realism offers an explanatory framework for the origin of psilocybin mushroom experiences rooted in biology and materialism. However, psychopharmacological realism as the predominant explanation of magic mushroom experiences and their potential

meanings is partial and limited, particularly when considering the use and construction of meaning of magic mushrooms in the social world. This is due to the reductionism of conceptualising experiences as ahistorical, acultural and transcendent neurobiological phenomena, and the negation of the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping experiences with psychedelics (Langlitz 2010, 2012).

This limitation of psychopharmacological realism stems from its conception of psychedelic experiences as a ‘natural kind’ of experience; as a stable biological object which should be investigated via the methods of the natural sciences (Hacking 1995, Langlitz 2010). However, psychedelic experiences are better thought of as experiences of a ‘human kind’; they are not mere biological events but are complex experiences had by self-reflexive and culturally situated conscious human beings (Hacking 1995). How they are culturally and socially understood shapes and informs how they come to be experienced (Langlitz 2010, Dobkin de Rios 1975). As Langlitz (2010, pg. 51) states:

‘new ways of talking about drug experiences certainly leave the drugs unchanged but not the experiences which they elicit in self-conscious human beings. There is little doubt that [a psychopharmacological researchers’] neurologized hallucinogen experience is strikingly different from the spirit quest of an Amazonian medicine man’.

In this respect the epistemological orientation to the object of study comes to inform how the object of study is experienced and understood; ‘knowledge’ which is culturally and historically situated loops back into and changes the understandings of experiences (Foucault 1973). In the case of magic mushrooms psychopharmacological realism comes to act as the dominant understanding of mushroom experiences in and of themselves. Psychopharmacological researchers tend to conceptualise their experiences with psilocybin in neurological terms; casting themselves as ‘neurobiological subjects’ and their experiences as resulting exclusively from psychopharmacological neuromodulation (Langlitz 2012). What is important to note is there is nothing ‘in’ magic mushrooms or the experiences they may occasion which causes this understanding of experiences; it is a culturally and historically located understanding informed by the Post-Enlightenment discourses of the West (Langlitz 2010). People in indigenous cultures who use psilocybin mushrooms ritualistically develop entirely different non-psychopharmacological understandings of the origin of their experiences. This is often through forms of spiritual animism, where magic mushrooms are understood to be supernatural entities that connect the person ingesting them (typically a shaman) to metaphysical realms populated by ancestor spirits and spirits of nature (Furst 1976, Letcher 2007).

This highlights a further limitation of psychopharmacological realism, its claim that it is a ‘true’ and objective account of the origin of experiences. I do not wish to deny that the consumption of

psilocybin mushrooms affects the neuro-chemical structures within the human brain, and that this biological action is partly involved in the manifestation of psilocybin specific effects. Magic mushrooms need to be consumed in order for them to occasion experiences and they clearly occasion ‘pharmacological events’ (Roberts 2008) in persons as a psychoactive substance. However, what I shall argue in the remainder of this chapter and across this thesis is that magic mushroom experiences, their meanings, and representations cannot be reduced solely to psychopharmacological realism, and that the conception of mushroom experiences as ahistorical and acultural phenomena is mistaken.

In order to challenge the truth claim of psychopharmacological realism and to explore the meanings made of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion it is necessary to consider an epistemological position which foregrounds how social, cultural and historical processes influence the understanding of experiences; namely social constructionism (Liebrucks 2001, Burr 2003).

3.3 Social Constructionism and Magic Mushrooms

Social constructionism is an umbrella term applied to a range of epistemological approaches which share common theoretical features (Burr 2003). Broadly, social constructionism takes a critical stance to the assumptions of realist epistemologies; ‘reality’ is not rendered objectively knowable through research techniques, language, or representation but is instead shaped and constituted by them (Edley 2001, Liebrucks 2001). Knowledge is understood to be the result of socially mediated and historically generated symbolic systems; primarily language, but also other signifying and discursive practices (Burr 2003). The ‘real world’ (ontology) is considered to be inaccessible to us other than through these signifying practices, all of which act to form the realities they seek to describe, including the signifying practices of the human and social sciences (Foucault 1973, Liebrucks 2001). Social constructionism contends that our knowledge and representations of the world act in a way that is constitutive and constructive of reality (Burr 2003), and that as such it is not possible to attain knowledge of the world as a prediscursive or presocial realm unmediated by our representations of it (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001).

Taking psychopharmacological realism as an example, social constructionism contends that rather than obtaining knowledge about the ‘reality’ which underpins magic mushroom experiences, this approach constructs knowledge through the technologies and assumptions it employs to research the phenomena. Rather than ‘uncovering truth’ about the origin of psilocybin experiences, psychopharmacological realism constructs a version of reality grounded in bio-psychological materialism. This version of reality is sustained by social processes rather than any claim to objective ‘truth’ (Burr 2003).

As such, social constructionism challenges claims that it is possible to garner ‘truthful’ or objective accounts of the world. Rather, social constructionism contends that no one account or version of events is objectively ‘true’ as truth is a function of constitutive social forces (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001). This enables multiplicity and pluralism of accounts as social processes, which allows for multiple conceptions of phenomena and events to exist, often simultaneously (Burr 2003). However, this position of multiplicity need not be relativist as I shall discuss in subsequent sections. A related aspect of social constructionist epistemology is the assertion that no understanding of phenomena is acultural, ahistorical or universal (Burr 2003, Edley 2001). Understandings are always products of particular times and places, and are shaped by political, social and historical forces (Blackman 2001).

Returning to psychedelic phenomena as an example, social constructionism contends that rather than conceptualising aspects of mushroom experiences as discernible and categorical features of ingestion, they instead need to be understood as a product of historical, social, and cultural factors. For example Carhart-Harris & Nutt (2010 pg.297) state from their survey research with psychedelic users that

‘the strong association between hallucinogenic drugs and psychodynamic and spiritual phenomena ... highlights the need for systematic, neurobiologically-informed definitions of these ill-defined, but evidently important concepts’.

A social constructionist orientation would challenge the assertion that spiritual and psychodynamic concepts relate to universal neurobiological phenomena. Instead the contention would be that ‘psychodynamic phenomena’, for example, is a constructed understanding which is dependent upon a particular conception of human subjects, based in the psychological discourses arising from the late-19th to early-20th centuries and their recent uptake and development in neurological sciences (Blackman 2001). By considering the social and cultural nature of phenomena social constructionism can be seen to be critical of structuralist assumptions about humans as psychological beings (Burr 2003).

A final key feature of social constructionism is a focus upon language. Language is seen as the predominant mode of representation, as a precondition of thought and the medium through which social understandings are reproduced and constructed (Burr 2003). Rather than conceptualising language as a transparent medium through which experience and understanding is communicated, language is seen to be constructive of, and constructed by, our understandings, and as serving certain functions in social interaction (Potter & Wetherell 1987). Whilst language is not the only means through which knowledge and reality are socially constructed (material, institutional factors and practices are also instrumental, Blackman 2001, Parker 1998), it is often afforded primacy as

constituting the social world (Burr 2003). Whilst a realist approach to language treats peoples' accounts of psychedelic experiences as descriptive of what happened (e.g. the perception of entities), social constructionism encourages a consideration of the ways in which these accounts are socially constituted and what the function or purpose of these accounts are (Hall & Jefferson 2006), (e.g. what are people drawing upon to claim that what they perceived were beings, and why are they communicating this particular experience).

Having broadly established a social constructionist epistemology I shall now detail a more specific theoretical orientation from within this approach; Foucauldian discourse (Parker 1992, Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). I am using this as the theoretical framework from which to approach my analysis in this thesis, as it is useful for addressing the ways in which magic mushroom users construct meaning of their experiences and how these meanings are negotiated in the contemporary social world.

3.3.1 Magic Mushrooms and Discourse: Definition

The concept of discourse has undergone many different permutations but many contemporary ideas concerning discourse have been influenced by the writings of philosopher Michael Foucault (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008, Mills 2004). Discourses can be defined as bodies of knowledge or sets of statements and concepts which construct objects, phenomena, topics and practices, shaping understandings of aspects of our world (Parker 1992, Hall 1997). As Foucault (1972, pg.49) states, discourses are '*practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak*'. Objects, practices, and phenomena are socially constructed through ideology, representation, and practice, rendering particular ways-of-being and ways-of-thinking possible within a given culture and time (Mills 2004, Willig 2008). As such, discourse is constitutive of communicated reality, having the power to define the parameters of thought, talk and action (Martin & Stenner 2004, Blackman 2001). In contrast to realism which contends that there is a 'real' world independent of representation comprised of discoverable and measurable phenomena, a discursive approach contends that 'reality' is constituted through discourse; our culturally and historically produced understandings of the world shape how it is made sense of and experienced (Foucault 1972, Burr 2003). As such, phenomena cannot be investigated and 'discovered' as discrete 'real' entities divorced from culture and history (Foucault 1972). Instead, historical and cultural understandings shape how a phenomenon is understood, experienced, lived, and researched (Edley 2001). This is at the heart of discourse: phenomena typically seen in essential terms (such as personhood or subjectivity, the psyche, sexuality) are instead constructed as historical and social products, constituted through discourses (Hook 2007).

For example, a realist account of mystical experience occasioned by psilocybin (Griffiths et al 2006) and by extension magic mushrooms, treats ‘mystical experience’ as an ontological entity, a ‘thing’ which ‘exists’ independent of cultural concepts of mysticism. It is treated as an ‘essential’ quality of the substance, determinable through placebo control and psychometric measurement. In contrast a discursive account would consider ‘mystical experience’ not as an ontological entity affecting all persons who consume the substance in the right dose and context, but as a discursive entity; a culturally and historically produced construction of experience constituted through discourse. The relatedness of constructions of ‘mystical experience’ to psilocybin mushrooms may be influenced by ‘entheogenic’ conceptions of psychedelic substances; a conception and terminology devised by Ruck et al (1979) with the deliberate intention of categorising magic mushrooms (and other plant-based psychedelics) as sacramental agents to be consumed for spiritual purposes. ‘Entheogenic discourse’ is itself constructed from specific Western religious discourses concerning the figure of the ‘mystic’ - one who achieves experiential union with the divine (Letcher 2007). This particular conceptualisation can be contrasted with the construction of psilocybin mushrooms by indigenous Mesoamerican peoples who do not share the cultural historical discourses of ‘mysticism’ (Metzner 2005). Instead they conceptualise experiences with mushrooms differently, typically via an animist discourse where mushroom experiences are represented as enabling encounters with ancestral, nature based, or mythological spirits (Furst 1976, Letcher 2007). A discursive approach contends that it is not the substance in and of itself which occasions ‘mystical experience’, instead the experience of ingesting the substance cannot be understood without reference to the discourses from which we can speak about it, discourses shaped by particular social, cultural, and historical understandings and practices.

3.3.2 Discourse, History, and Multiplicity

Discourses are historically and culturally produced; they arise out of various conditions of possibility (material, social and ideological), undergoing change and modification as a result of the competition and interaction between ideas, concepts, practices and events within a given epoch (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). As Wetherell (1995, pg.15) states, ‘*discourses... embody the relics of many different social and ideological struggles*’. As such, when considering discourses it is necessary to attend to the historical conditions in which they arise, historical deconstruction of which is labelled genealogy (Hook 2007, Yates & Hiles 2010). Whilst a full genealogical analysis is beyond the remit of the current study, it is still necessary to consider the historically, politically and culturally situated nature of discourses, how they develop with time, how this leads to objects being constructed in particular ways and the relationship between discourse, history and power (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008).

Letcher (2007) demonstrates this through his identification of multiple historically situated discourses which construct magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion in particular ways (see Chapter 2 for a full account). Throughout the 19th century in the UK psilocybin containing mushrooms were constructed through a 'pathological discourse' as poisonous fungi, and the experiences they occasion were represented as valueless poison-induced delusions (Letcher 2007). The discovery in the mid-20th century of tryptamine chemicals and psychoactive plants in the laboratory and anthropologically (Schultes, Hoffman & Ratch 2001) heralded the advent of new discourses relevant to these chemicals and the experiences they can occasion. These 'new' discourses however are themselves a product of history and culture. For example 'psychedelic discourse' which conceptualised these chemical agents as occasioning 'mind manifesting' experiences (Stafford 1992), is intimately linked with the understanding of persons as 'psychological subjects' prevalent in the 20th century (Letcher 2007). Similarly, 'entheogenic discourse' which constructs tryptamines as able to occasion religious or mystical experiences (Ruck et al 1979), has its origins in Western religious tradition. The '(re)discovery' of psychoactive fungi in Mexico by Westerners and the bringing of this discovery to North America (Wasson 1957) occurred in this same epoch, enabling previously 'poisonous' fungi to be constructed in new ways and subsequently utilised as a recreational, creative, therapeutic, and mystical agent (Letcher 2007). Simultaneously, historical events were unfolding that enabled the emergence of 'prohibitionist discourse' which troubled these constructions by associating 'hallucinogenic' tryptamines with other 'dangerous drugs of abuse' and criminalising them (Letcher 2007, Wark & Galliher 2010).

These changing understandings of psilocybin mushrooms are to some extent illustrative of multiplicity. Irrespective of the material nature of psilocybin mushrooms, how they are constituted and engaged with depends upon the negotiation of representational systems which are culturally and historically situated (Burr 2003). Multiplicity is inherent in discourse; the ontological concept of essential reality is discarded and 'reality' is instead conceptualised in constructionist terms where a variety of 'realities' can be constructed around a given phenomenon (Martin & Stenner 2004), based on different situated discourses. It is also important to note that multiple discourses can be deployed simultaneously, in both complimentary and contradictory ways. For example, 'psychedelic' (that magic mushrooms can enable access to hidden aspects of the mind) and 'entheogenic' (that magic mushrooms occasion transcendent mystical experience) discourses share orientations with a 'psychological discourse'; where the experiences of psychedelics and mysticism are constructed as pharmacologically induced phenomenological events (Letcher 2007). Discourses are not isolated entities but form connected webs of meaning within a given period (Mills 2004). The lack of a unitary account of what things are 'really like' based solely on their material properties, leaves open the possibility for multiplicity of accounts and can enable consideration of

the substantial variability in how mushrooms and mushroom experiences are constructed as objects, both historically and presently (Blackman 2001). However, the multiplicity of discourse is more than rhetorical relativism, due to the situated nature of discourses within a given epoch and how the concepts of power and materiality are intimately related to this multiplicity (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001).

3.3.3 Discourse, Truth, and Power

Despite the multiplicity of discourses as indicating the possibility of a relativist perspective, a Foucauldian approach does not see all possible discourses and their associated constructions as 'epistemologically equivalent' (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001). Each historical period holds certain discourses as more valued or dominant than others. This relates to issues of 'truth' within a given society, which is not conceptualised as an objective fact but as a social production. As Foucault (1979 pg.46 as cited in Mills 2004 pg.16) states:

'[t]ruth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints... Each society has its regime of truth, it's 'general politics' of truth: that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the technologies and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth: those who are charged with saying what counts as true'.

'Regimes of truth' and dominant discourses serve to establish boundaries around what it is possible to think, say and do, offering classifications which legitimate certain conceptualisations and actions and limit and restrict others as unthinkable (Hall 1997, Letcher 2007).

Taking the example of magic mushrooms, Letcher (2007) argues that competing discourses make differing 'truth claims' about the nature of mushroom experiences and how mushrooms are constituted as psychoactive objects. The contemporary 'regime of truth' regarding the status of reality is one of scientism and materialism, and the associated conception of psychedelic drugs is that of psychopharmacological realism. Psychedelic alterations to consciousness are constructed as the product of pharmacology and psychology, anything experienced as a result of mushroom consumption is strictly 'in the brain'. To claim that magic mushrooms allow you to have an experience of seeing 'discarnate entities' or perceiving an alternate dimension is acceptable if this experience is considered solely as a product of substance mind/brain interaction (i.e. a hallucination). However, to claim that the perceived 'entities' or alternate dimensions are 'ontologically real' in some way (i.e. not a product of the experiencer's mind but possessing an

external existence) sits outside of contemporary understandings of ‘truth’ and is either labelled ‘mad’ (Letcher 2007) or as a misinterpretation based on cultural difference (Shanon 2002a).

In establishing boundaries and delineating what can and cannot be constituted as ‘truth’ discourse is intimately linked with power. As Foucault (1980, pg.93) states:

‘in any society there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.’

The relationship between power and discourse is not one of top down repression but instead is diffuse; dominant discourses supported and bolstered by institutional practices and structures are reproduced locally through signifying practices and action, in essence the boundaries established by discourses are replicated at numerous levels within the social world (Parker 1992, Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). In this regard, entrenched discourses become ‘common sense’ understandings of phenomena (Willig 2008, Parker 1992). Power and discourse are therefore linked to issues of governmentality: particular regimes of truth can be aligned with political objectives encouraging people to govern themselves as their wishes or fears become aligned with the objectives that discursive practices embody (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001). In the context of magic mushrooms, Riley, Thompson & Griffin (2010) demonstrate this relationship between power and discourse. Magic mushroom users offered constructions of their use framed as common sense which fit with contemporary political ‘neoliberal’ discourse (e.g. the need to be a responsible economic citizen whose mushroom use is hedonistic but restrained and confined to weekends and holidays). This marks a shift from counter-cultural psychedelic discourses prevalent in the 1960s Hippie and 1980s New Age Traveller movements (Wells 1973, Hetherington 2000).

Whilst power can be restrictive it is also productive, generating new possible forms of practice. As power and discourse are diffused throughout the social body and are manifest in various sites of interaction and talk, discourses can be manipulated, negotiated and are always subject to contestation (Mills 2004). As such, inherent to the concept of power is that of resistance; *‘it is in the nature of language that alternative constructions are always possible and that counter discourses can and do eventually emerge’* (Willig 2008, pg.113). Foucault (1979) argued that resistance is the ‘irrefutable opposite’ embedded in every discourse. He provided the example of sexuality; in the 19th century the medical classification of homosexuality enabled justification of social controls upon ‘deviant sexual practices’. However, medicalization also enabled a ‘reverse

discourse' wherein the very classifications used to disqualify homosexual practices as 'wrong' were taken up to argue for their legitimacy by accounting for homosexuality as 'natural' and biologically innate. As such, a discourse which presents a particular construction implicitly makes possible the constructing of its opposite by refutation, embedding resistance within the configuration of power. For example, the dominant institutional discourse about drugs and drug use is that they are 'harmful' both personally and socially. This discourse has within it the potential for refutation; it opens up sites of discussion about drugs and their effects, such as in the media, education, legislature, and interpersonal interactions, thereby creating the space within which these dominant notions can be challenged, both rhetorically in talk and texts, and through practice via the consumption of drugs.

This flux between discourses of resistance and power is important to the study of magic mushrooms, because it is in this flux that new understandings arise (Blackman 2001). Letcher (2007) splits discourses used to construct the mushroom into 'dominant' and 'resistive' discourses based upon those formulated by the institutional machinery of medicine, judiciary and research (prohibition, psychology and pathology) and those generated by users to account for experience (entheogenic, psychedelic, recreational and animist). However, this binary categorisation is increasingly blurred; in recent years psychopharmacology has taken an interest in the 'entheogenic' and 'psychedelic' properties of psilocybin (Griffiths et al 2006, Moreno et al 2006) and similarly 'psychonaut' psychedelic writers (those who write about psychedelics and their meanings through auto-ethnography, see Chapter 2) increasingly conceptualise their experiences in the neurological terms of 'psychological discourse' (e.g. Powell 2011).

Letcher's (2007) account of power and resistance is partial and limited however. A key aspect of Foucault's conception of power in discourse is that whilst resistance is endemic to discourse it is constituted in the terms of the discourse which it is seen to resist (Foucault 1979, 1980). As Blackman & Walkerdine (2001, pg. 117) state:

'power does not merely repress or marginalise certain modes of existence but comes to structure those very existences and the resistances against them. It produces our desires and subjective commitment to certain discourses by aligning our wishes and fears with the objectives embodied in discursive practices'.

Take for example the governmental discourses of 'harm minimisation' in drug use (O'Malley 2002, Moore & Fraser 2006). These understandings mark a shift from a previous historical position of advocating 'abstention' from drug use, towards encouraging people to responsibly 'use' rather than recklessly 'abuse' drugs (Plant 2003). This shift has been seen by some theorists as brought about by a fluid attempt by governmental institutions to embrace widespread resistive understandings of

official discourses (O'Malley 2002). This in turn, however, has become a dominant discourse which users then take up to understand the ways they ought to construct their use of drugs in language and potentially conduct the practice of their use as a managed form of 'responsible' drug consumption (Rødner 2005). Resistance is capitulated into the broader official discourse and constituted through it. This was found in the work of Riley, Thompson & Griffin (2010) whose participants constructed themselves as responsible neoliberal citizens and represented appropriate 'controlled' use of magic mushrooms the 'correct' way to use them. This demonstrates how discourses construct resistance within their own agendas; whilst consuming magic mushrooms may be seen as a resistive challenge to the societal norms (and associated discourse) of late capitalist society, it is a resistance which is shaped by those discourses. Whilst resistance can and sometimes does change or challenge predominant understandings over time, it is always in the first instance constrained by that which it opposes (Foucault 1980).

3.3.4 Discourse, Subjectivity and Language

Thus far I have considered discourses at a social level, and I now wish to briefly consider how discourses operate at the level of individual mushroom users in the constitution of social meaning; how they draw upon, negotiate and mould discourses to construct meanings in interactive talk. Discourses are taken to be constitutive of subjectivity, and this has led some critics to assert that discourse is overly deterministic, that persons are conceptualised as determined by discursive forces (Burr 2003). However, as Martin & Stenner (2004, pg. 398) state:

both the subject and subjectivity are brought into being through the discourses comprising the system of representation of a particular period and culture. This is not to say that our participants (or indeed we) are 'cultural dupes', merely relaying dominant discourses. Rather, the individual is 'active but not sovereign' (Weedon, 1987: 41). People actively 'make sense' of their personal and social worlds and exercise a certain agency in how they represent these, but this agency is exercised within the parameters of a finite number of discourses. Thus the poststructuralist research paradigm recognizes both the constitutive force of discourse, and in particular of discursive practices and at the same time recognizes that people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices.

I align my conception of magic mushroom using subjects with this understanding that people are 'agentic but not sovereign': they are able to flexibly construct their experiences out of available discourses and discursive configurations, but in their constructing of meaning can only do so from the discourses which exist socially around the phenomenon which they are making meaning of. In this sense discourses can be mobilised and negotiated, but meaning can only be made from those discourses which are presently available for sense making, and constructions are subject to the

socially constructed concerns of truth, knowledge, power and resistance which characterise a particular epoch (Blackman 2001).

A limitation of this approach to theory (and its use within this thesis) is that it provides no explanation as to how this agency is manifest and operates. Several discourse scholars have attempted to account for the subjective differences in people's individual accounts or their apparent agency in using discourses to construct accounts through the use of psychodynamic (Parker 2005, Hollway & Jefferson 2003), phenomenological (Butt & Langdridge 2003) and neuropsychological concepts (Cromby 2007). Others have turned to embodiment and corporeality to attempt to answer this question (Willig 2007, Blackman 2001). The consideration of the mechanisms of agency and their relationship to discourse in the context of drug use is a philosophical debate which is beyond the remit of this thesis, but is an interesting consideration for future research.

In order to explore how discourses constitute subjectivity in the context of particular social phenomena it is necessary to explore language, which is often described as '*the end point of discourse or what is given to the speaking subject as a result of the negotiation of practices, institutions and texts*' (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001 pg.118). Language is taken to be the primary way we communicate about 'reality' and construct it (Burr 2003) and as such it is possible to discern discourses through their operation in language and accounting (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). This has previously been undertaken in research into the meaning of magic mushrooms and the constitution of meaning in social contexts (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010), and informs the current research into the ways meaning is constructed by magic mushroom users, something I shall elaborate in the next chapter.

In summary, discourse enables a consideration of magic mushroom use and the meanings made of it as stemming from cultural factors which are located in the contemporary social, historical and political context (Letcher 2007). Multiple discourses can be drawn upon in the construction of meaning, and issues of power and 'truth' shape which discourses predominate at a given time and place (Blackman 2001). Resistance to these dominant discourses is possible, but this resistance is always shaped and tempered by that which it seeks to oppose (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001).

3.5 Summary of Theoretical Orientation

In summary, the theoretical orientation of this thesis is social constructionist. I conceptualise the meanings made of magic mushrooms not as emanating solely from essentialist phenomenological experiences or 'psychopharmacological realism', but instead as being constructed from culturally and historically contingent understandings which permeate the social world (Martin & Stenner 2004). This is not to entirely dismiss materiality and the role of pharmacology in occasioning

experiences; mushrooms need to be ingested in order for them to be experienced and they undeniably occasion a profound ‘pharmacological event’ (Roberts 2008) for people who use them. However, the psychobiology of ingestion is inadequate to account for the varied and multiple meanings which people construct of magic mushrooms; how they can be conceptualised as a fun recreational drug to do with friends (Riley & Blackman 2008), as a sacrament to awaken the divine within (Ruck et al 1979), and as a shamanic gateway to metaphysical realities (McKenna 1991). As such, this thesis shifts epistemological focus from the essentialism of neurobiology and phenomenology, to constructionism; considering how the multiple, contradictory and diverse ways in which magic mushrooms have been constituted since their (re)discovery (Letcher 2007) are taken up and modified by users in their constructions of meaning in current era.

In order to explore these understandings I draw upon a conception of Foucauldian discourse (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008); theorising social understandings as relatively coherent bodies of knowledge (discourses), which are taken up by subjects and which provide ways of constructing the phenomenon in question (Parker 1992). Rather than theorising aspects of mushroom experiences as acultural, ahistorical and enduring features of ingestion (e.g. as Griffiths et al 2006 conceptualise ‘mystical experience’), I instead conceptualise the understandings and representations of experiences as socially produced through discourse (Martin & Stenner 2004).

Discourses are theorised in this thesis as inseparable from notions of power (Foucault 1980) with some discourses being socially constituted as operating in ‘truth’ and others as marginalised or disavowed. For example, we are currently in a social-discursive era characterised by a ‘scientific zeitgeist’ (Letcher 2007) which positions ‘psychopharmacological realist’ understandings of magic mushroom induced alterations to consciousness as ‘true’. These discourses serve to marginalise alternative discourses which constitute mushroom experiences as esoteric or animist, constructing them as ‘mad’ (Letcher 2007). As such, in this thesis I shall explore how discourses function in ‘truth’, how they are negotiated and resisted by participants, and how certain ways of speaking about magic mushrooms are opened up and closed down by power in discourse (Hall 1997).

This thesis seeks to explore the discourses which constitute the current meanings of magic mushrooms for users and how these discursive constructions are negotiated, manipulated, reworked and understood (Blackman 2001) by magic mushroom users themselves. This has implications for how contemporary ‘psychedelic subjectivity’ is constituted and negotiated. In the next chapter I shall address the methodology undertaken in this study, the means by which users accounts were obtained in order to explore the ways the meanings of magic mushrooms are currently constructed and negotiated.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Research Process: Iteration, Research Question and Aims

In this chapter I shall discuss the practical methodology undertaken for generating data, detailing the ‘research design’ (the planning, intention and rationale behind methodological decisions) and ‘research process’ (a reflexive account of conducting the research, illustrating alterations to the design brought about by practical limitations and the subject matter). As with most qualitative research the development of the methodology has been ‘iterative’; elements of study design and process have informed each other as a series of cycles as the research has been conducted, rather than following a linear path of design and execution (Crabtree & Miller 1999). I have attempted to illustrate this iteration in the following sections by not explicitly distinguishing elements of research design and process, instead weaving together design and process to offer as full account as possible of the methodological decisions made.

Before outlining and discussing the methodological decisions undertaken in this thesis, I shall firstly reorientate the reader to the questions guiding this research by briefly restating the research question and aims of the project (see Chapter 1 Introduction, pg. 17 for a more detailed rationale).

As previously stated in Chapter 1 the research question of this thesis is:

‘What do magic mushrooms mean to those who use them?’

Further to the research question three research aims were generated to guide the project. The aims of this research are:

- 1) To explore different meanings of magic mushrooms and their construction by users.
- 2) To explore the tensions between different ways in which experience/reality are constructed and understood by magic mushroom users.
- 3) To explore how understandings of magic mushroom experiences proposed by popular and academic literature are engaged with by magic mushroom users (specifically hedonistic, psychological, entheogenic, and animistic understandings).

The research question is broad to enable research to be conducted with a specific agenda but which allows for wide variety of possible constructions to be provided by participants and explored. Similarly, the research aims are both broad and focused; aims one and two designed to enable elicitation of varied constructions of magic mushroom use and its meaning from users. Aim three is more focused and enables exploration of topic areas relevant to the experiencing and use of psilocybin mushrooms as suggested by existing research literatures. As such, the aims are intended

to be both inductive (participant led) and theoretical (informed by literature and researcher interest) (Braun & Clarke 2006).

4.2 Sampling

4.2.1 Sampling: Inclusion Criteria

Participants were included if they were a minimum of 18 years of age (no upper age limit was imposed), had consumed psilocybin-containing fungi a minimum of twice in their lifetime (with no upper limit on frequency of consumption), self-identified as ‘magic mushroom’ or ‘psychedelic drug’ users, and expressed a desire to consume psilocybin mushrooms again in the future. The rationale for these criteria was that the research required participants for whom psilocybin mushroom use is, or was, a repeated and (to some extent) desirable activity, as opposed to a singular instance of drug experimentation.

A relatively infrequent minimum use of magic mushrooms in the recruitment criteria was selected for practical and epistemological reasons. A practical concern was the shift in availability of magic mushrooms in recent years. Changes to the UK and Dutch drug control laws in 2005 & 2008 respectively have rendered cultivated varieties of magic mushrooms (such as *Psilocybe Cubensis*) and the means to grow them less easy to obtain (Hillebrand, Olszewski & Sedefov 2010). Prior to this legal change there was a large cultivation base for these mushrooms, enabling these varieties to be purchased legally and illegally (depending upon location) throughout Europe, often via the internet and postal system (Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiours & Zoll 2009). Whilst there may still be a clandestine online trade in cultivated mushrooms, evidence suggests that the increased risk in receiving controlled substances via the post has encouraged many of those seeking psychedelics to purchase or obtain other legal substances online instead (Hillebrand, Olszewski & Sedefov 2010, Walsh 2011, Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011). Whilst mushrooms may also be obtainable through the traditional illegal drug market, participants informed me that buying mushrooms from ‘drug dealers’ was rare as they are hard to conceal objects for clandestine sales²⁰. Whilst cultivated mushrooms (and the means to cultivate them) may still be available illegally via the internet, the reduction in their availability was seen as significant in selecting a frequency of use criteria for inclusion in this study. As such the minimum number of experiences required to participate is lower than that of studies conducted during the periods of legal tolerance and wider availability of psilocybin mushrooms (e.g. Riley & Blackman 2008, Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiours & Zoll 2009).

²⁰ This is in contrast to the findings of research conducted in the United States, where purchasing mushrooms in person from drug dealers is the typical means of obtaining them (Hallock et al 2013).

Similarly, the availability of indigenous magic mushrooms (*Psilocybe Semilanceata* or ‘Liberty Caps’) is often limited by seasonality and weather conditions; they fruit in the Autumn for a few weeks, and how good a ‘harvest’ there is in a given year is heavily affected by climatic conditions (Stamets 1996, Letcher 2006). It is however possible to preserve mushrooms (through drying or freezing) if there is a year of abundance, but participants informed me that it is rare to stockpile them in sufficient quantity to use throughout the year. Again the relative poverty of mushroom harvests due to adverse weather conditions in the UK over the last few years was considered a further reason for including a low number of experiences with mushrooms as baseline inclusion criteria.

Secondly, the epistemological focus of this study is upon how meanings of magic mushroom experiences are constructed discursively across a broad ‘spectrum’ of users and ‘styles’ of use. As such two prior experiences with mushrooms were considered the minimum requirement for people to be able to construct meaning of their experiences beyond a singular instance of drug experimentation. This was intended to be in keeping with the research question and aims, which emphasise exploration of different constructions among a variety of magic mushroom users.

4.2.2 Sampling: ‘Styles’ of Magic Mushroom Use

In attempting to recruit participants a deliberate effort was made to achieve a varied sample of magic mushroom users, drawn from a range of presumed ‘styles’ of mushroom use. It is not my intention to suggest that mushroom users can be categorised and divided into discrete ‘types’ of user or enthusiast. Previous research has argued that there is no one specific kind of magic mushroom user; but instead a varied and overlapping series of motivations for consuming magic mushrooms in particular contexts, of differing types and doses for diverse recreational, social, psychological, and spiritual reasons (Riley & Blackman 2008, Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiours & Zoll 2009).

However, I considered it reasonable to assume that within these overlapping motivations, practices and understandings, people may have different levels of affiliation with, or affinity for, particular contexts and doses as well as different levels of engagement with broader ‘psychedelic culture’. For example, a ‘psychonaut’ influenced by the psychedelic philosophy of the writer Terrence McKenna who consumes large doses of mushrooms in isolation with the specific intention of occasioning a psychedelic entity encounter (Luke 2008), may be considered to be enacting a different ‘style’ of use to someone who takes a low dose of mushrooms at a party to facilitate social interaction (Riley & Blackman 2008). A similar variety of ‘styles’ was observed amongst my key informants (friends and acquaintances that use psychedelics); some were primarily immersed in entheogenic practices (spiritual use of psychedelic substances) whilst others engaged more

exclusively in recreational poly-drug activities, and others still shifted fluidly between these practices.

Based on the combination of evidence suggested by the literature (Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiours & Zoll 2009, Carhart-Harris & Nutt 2010) and anecdotal reports from my key informants, an a priori assumption was made about there being various flexible and non-exclusive 'styles' of mushroom use. These are not seen as discrete and discernible categories but different approaches to, or reasons for, taking mushrooms in varying quantities and in different contexts.

Efforts were made to sample participants who used different strains of psilocybin mushrooms (indigenous 'Liberty Caps' or cultivated mushroom varieties), different doses (low to high), obtained in different ways (picked, grown, purchased legally or illegally), used in different contexts (in isolation, with friends at home, at music festivals/free parties, on holiday, outdoors etc.), for different purposes (hedonistic, spiritual or personal developmental reasons), and with varying frequency.

Additionally, attempts were made to recruit people with differing engagement with 'psychedelic culture': the literature, media, art, music, and social practices which are influenced by psychedelic substances (Letcher 2006). Participants were sought who have involvement in spiritual and hedonistic cultures associated with psychedelic drug use, such as Neo-Shamanism (Wallis 1999) or the PsyTrance dance scene (St John 2009). Also participants were sought who engaged with 'psychedelic literature'; the published works of writers such as Huxley, Leary, Castaneda and McKenna who discuss psychedelic experiences and philosophy, as well as those who engaged with broader psychedelic culture in the forms of art work, podcasts, documentaries and musical genres associated with psychedelics.

Participants were also sought who had little or no engagement with, or lacked awareness of 'psychedelic culture'. Instead their magic mushroom use was situated in broader practices of recreational (often poly) drug consumption (McCambridge et al 2005), or as a result of exposure to magic mushrooms through friendship networks. Put simply, participants were also sought who did not engage with art, literature, or social cultures associated with psychedelics.

Attempts were made to recruit widely, to capture the (arguably imaginary) spectrum of users from committed 'psychonauts' heavily immersed in 'psychedelic culture', to those for whom magic mushrooms are just one of many recreational substances. Similar efforts were made to sample participants from a range of ages, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and participants of all genders.

4.3 Recruitment

4.3.1 Recruitment: Network/Snowball

The intended recruitment strategy was ‘network’ or ‘snowball sampling’ due to the presumed sensitive and ‘hidden’ nature of the research topic (Lee 1993, Browne 2005). Deliberate recruitment from different ‘friend-of-friend’ networks was conducted to avoid drawing data from a single social group or friendship network (Noy 2008), which may have resulted in a limited sub set of accounts of mushroom use and its meaning from a single group of friends. As previously stated the intention was to obtain a ‘variety’ of users and ‘styles’ of use based upon a priori assumptions from personal contacts and prior studies. Five initial ‘friend of friend’ contacts (of the researcher’s) who were known to have consumed psilocybin mushrooms (with differing rationales for doing so) were approached and asked to act as potential ‘key informants’ (Tremblay 1957); both participating in the project and recruiting other participants through their own separate social networks. I have deliberately avoided the term ‘gatekeeper’ in this thesis, as it can imply someone who controls access to others for the purposes of research from within a cultural hierarchy or institution (Miller & Bell 2012). Key informants were asked to contact friends of theirs whom they felt would be interested in participating in the study, by distributing an email advertisement including the researcher’s details. They were also asked to verbally inform (and provide with a voicemail number) any of their contacts who lacked email, in order to avoid excluding those without internet access. However, all initial contact between ‘snowballed’ interested parties and the researcher to assess their suitability for participation (based on the inclusion criteria) was conducted through email exchange (Rubin & Rubin 2005).

4.3.2 Recruitment: Open Recruitment/Advertising

In the initial research design ‘snowball sampling’ was intended as the principal method of recruitment, but this yielded fewer participants than originally presumed (10 in total, with an additional 5 expressing interest and subsequently declining to participate). After conversing with key informants and participants I learned that my previous assumptions about the hidden and secret nature of magic mushroom use were over-zealous. Whilst participants were concerned for their privacy and anonymity it was suggested that open recruitment strategies could yield responses; a suggestion supported by methodological literature about researching sensitive topics and hidden populations (Miller & Bell 2012). Recruitment was expanded beyond initial snowballed networks to the broader public (‘open’ recruitment) through a combination of posters (Browne & Russell 2003) and online advertising.

A5 sized printed posters were constructed providing a brief statement about the research, inclusion criteria, and an invitation to contact the researcher via email or voicemail to participate (see Appendix 1). The combination of telephone and email contact options was intended to increase inclusivity by not excluding those who lacked either the internet or a telephone. Posters were displayed in a range of public sites (Browne & Russell 2003) including community notice boards, 'Head Shops' (shops that legally sell drugs paraphernalia, merchandise, and 'legal highs'), cafes, and pubs, at various locations in the South West and in the West & East Midlands. Public locations were selected to try and increase sample size and diversity (Browne & Russell 2003), and sites were selected that were thought pertinent to specific magic mushroom users (such as Head Shops, a recruitment location used by Riley & Blackman 2008) and to the wider community. Multiple locations for recruitment were chosen to try and address the potential limitations of recruiting participants from a single geographical area where specific socioeconomic conditions and particular heterogeneous cultures of drug use could occur (such as those highlighted by Riley, Morey & Griffin 2008 when considering Ketamine use in a free party scene specific to the South West of England). The two geographical areas (the South West and the Midlands) were arbitrarily chosen based upon practical limitations of where the researcher was able to travel to and was familiar with. A potential limitation that the localised nature of advertising in these sites could have resulted in an omission of participants from other areas of the UK was marginally offset by the use of snowball sampling and online advertising (see below), both of which yielded participants from a wider geographical area.

In addition to posters an online advertisement was made public via the University of Bath website, displayed on both the Campus Home Page and Psychology Department News Page for two weeks (see Appendix 1 for advertisement). This advertisement also aided recruitment, attracting participants from both student and non-student populations; a number of participants informed the researcher they had received the link to the study via interested friends who were involved in Higher Education but did not necessarily attend or work at the University. This strategy of online recruitment was selected in order to try and increase the variety of users, particularly those who are more 'recreational' in their use as well as those for whom mushroom use is 'psychonautic'. An alternate strategy could have involved messaging drugs forums (such as shroomery.org), but I was concerned this would exclusively attract 'psychonauts' and not those who have arrived at mushrooms through more drug oriented paths. As such, this recruitment strategy was deemed appropriate to elicit the sample necessary to achieve the research aims. However, this is a limited form of online advertising which did not attract a large number of participants. Although this was in keeping with the research agenda, where construction of meaning through depth interviewing is the focus and does not necessarily require a large sample, the sample cannot be seen as representative of all mushroom users.

Respondents to adverts were emailed and provided with more information via an information sheet (see Appendix 2), or if responding via telephone the information sheet was read to them aloud. This was intended to make the ‘task understanding’ (what participants are told the interview concerns) (Potter & Hepburn 2005) as clear as possible. If they agreed to participate a convenient time and place for interviewing was agreed. Participants were required to give informed consent prior to interview (see the section on Ethics below).

The deviation from the originally intended recruitment strategy was necessary in order to obtain a sufficient number of participants. In all recruitment modalities interest and curiosity about the study outstripped commitment to participate. Twelve respondents declined to participate, with ten engaging in no further contact with the researcher after their initial expression of interest, despite two follow up emails being sent, or a phone call being made. As such, the sample obtained is inherently self-selecting and is comprised of people motivated to discuss their experiences and participate in research. In this regard the sample cannot be considered representative of all magic mushroom users.

4.4 Participants

Twenty three (23) participants were recruited for this project and those who consented to participate ‘fit’ the intended sampling and recruitment criteria well. The sample was comprised of participants from a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, ages and genders, with varied ‘styles’ of magic mushroom use, and with varying involvement in ‘psychedelic culture’.

In identifying participants across this thesis, they have been assigned a name and a number. The assigning of participants numbers 1-23 based on the chronological order in which they were interviewed is to enable ease of categorisation when presenting descriptive information (e.g. information on magic mushroom use). The assigning of a name (a chosen or arbitrarily imposed pseudonym) is in keeping with qualitative research convention, and makes identification of particular participants across the thesis easier for the reader. The use of a name also allows participants to be seen as a coherent ‘character’ rather than as a collection of isolated extracts in analysis [See Appendix 3 for a participant list including name and number].

4.4.1 Demographics

Twenty three participants (7 female, 16 male) were recruited for the study. Nineteen participants identified as British, with a subset identifying as Northern Irish (x2) and Welsh (x1) and four as being of a different nationality (Spanish (x2), American and Eastern European). Three participants were non-native English speakers. Participants’ ages ranged from 19-60 years of age with a mean age of 33 years. Participants were in employment (10), self-employed (2), full time students (9),

unemployed (1) and retired (1). Sixteen participants were educated to first degree or higher (post-graduate and doctoral degrees), other participants were currently undertaking a first degree (1), possessed further education qualifications (2), and the remainder had not continued beyond mandatory education (4). All participants were of White European decent²¹.

4.4.2 Psilocybin Mushroom Consumption

Magic mushroom consumption reported by participants is important for contextualising constructions of particular experiences. The consumption of different doses of mushrooms, of different varieties, obtained in different ways, may impact upon the nature of accounts offered. I shall now detail the variety of psilocybin mushroom consumption in the current sample, in order to incorporate elements of practice and materiality; to partially account for why particular constructions or discourses are (re)produced by some participants pertinent to particular experiences, and others are not. Where appropriate this information will be reproduced in more detail in analysis sections and will be linked to specific participants so that an illustrative context for their accounts may be offered.

Varieties of mushrooms and the means of obtaining them

In their accounts participants spoke of three broad categories of magic mushrooms: firstly, ‘Liberty Caps’ (*Psilocybe Semilanceata*) the indigenous varieties of mushrooms which grow wild in the UK; secondly, non-indigenous cultivated or exotic varieties (greater in size than indigenous mushrooms) purchased during periods and in places of legal acceptance, grown by the user, or illegally imported. Participants who consumed non-indigenous species were often unable to clarify the specific strain they had obtained (e.g. *Psilocybe Mexicana*, *Psilocybe Cubensis* etc.), instead identifying exotic/cultivated mushrooms by their presumed place of origin where known, such as ‘Thai’ or ‘Mexican’. Given that non-indigenous strains share the common characteristics of being large fibrous mushrooms with variable psilocybin and psilocin yields (Letcher 2006) I believe it appropriate to group these together as cultivated or exotic mushrooms for the current study. The third mushroom category was ‘truffles’; the psilocybin containing sclerotia (hard pieces of mycelium) produced by certain cultivated varieties (e.g. *Psilocybe Atlantis*) in particular conditions (Pellegrini et al 2013). Truffles are legally sold in Amsterdam ‘Smart Shops’ as current Dutch drug laws classify only the fruiting fungal bodies of mushrooms as illegal, whilst in the UK they are prohibited due to more comprehensive legislation outlawing psilocybin (Pellegrini et al 2013, Walsh 2006). Although not taxonomically ‘mushrooms’ (fruiting fungal bodies), I have included sclerotia in the current study as they are a fungal product which contain the same active compounds

²¹ The relationship between magic mushrooms and both social class and ethnicity is beyond the remit of the current study. However, both are underexplored areas which would benefit from further research.

(Pellegrini et al 2013, Gartz, Allen & Merlin 1994), are marketed as ‘truffles’ (subterranean mushrooms), and because participants classified them as magic mushrooms. The species from which sclerotia were obtained were not identified by participants, with them simply being known as ‘truffles’ or ‘philosophers’ stones’.

The qualitative differences in specific strains of mushroom are not the focus of the present research project, what is important is how discourses surrounding a mushrooms’ place of origin, or broader category identification (e.g. as exotic, or Mexican, or indigenous etc.) may impact upon potential constructions of meaning. For example there is a mythological association between indigenous UK mushrooms and pre-Christian spirituality (Letcher 2006), an association that may affect the construction of potentially spiritual experiences with Liberty Caps.

As well as the type of mushroom consumed, how mushrooms are obtained may also have implications for how meaning is constructed. It is possible that picking mushrooms seasonally in the UK may lead to different constructions of meaning compared with the experience of legally purchasing mushrooms from a ‘Head Shop’; in the former case discourses around foraging may be pertinent, in the latter those of commodity. It is not my intention to provide a detailed survey of the ways in which magic mushrooms are obtained by users, instead this information is to provide context which may help in understanding how and why particular accounts are offered.

Eight participants reported exclusively consuming indigenous UK mushrooms that they had picked themselves (Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 18, and 21). One participant reported exclusively purchasing mushrooms with a quasi-legal status in Thailand where they lived temporarily (Participant 9). Two participants reported exclusively consuming truffles purchased in Amsterdam where they holidayed or lived temporarily (Participants 16, & 22). One participant reported buying cultivated strains both in the UK during the period of legal acceptance and subsequently whilst legal in Amsterdam (both mushrooms and truffles) (Participant 14). Three participants reported consuming mushrooms obtained illegally in foreign countries where mushrooms grow (Participants 10, 11 and 17). The remaining eight participants reported consuming both picked indigenous mushrooms & non-indigenous strains (as well as truffles) obtained legally and illegally (Participants 1, 6, 7, 8, 15, 19, 20, 23).

Frequency

Two experiences were considered the minimum number of mushroom experiences required for participation in order that people may offer constructions beyond an instance of drug experimentation. Participants were not explicitly asked about the frequency with which they consume or have consumed mushrooms; instead this information came up in the flow of interview

exchange. A limitation of this study is the lack of direct questions about frequency and practices of mushroom consumption, although as stated this is not the research focus.

Five participants had used mushrooms between 2 and 5 occasions (Participants 9, 13, 16, 20, and 22). The remaining eighteen participants have had multiple experiences with mushrooms, often characterised as periods of repeated and intense use when mushrooms were available to them.

Doses & Methods of administration

The doses of magic mushrooms consumed by participants also provide a possible material context for accounts offered. Dose reflects the quantity of psilocybin or psilocin ingested by consuming a particular weight or number of mushrooms. There is a clear dose dependent relationship between the effects experienced by an individual and the dose of psilocybin/psilocin they ingest, with more 'intense' experiences reported with larger doses (Hasler et al 2004). Returning to the idea of drug experiences as an inseparable 'nexus' of the biological, phenomenological and discursive (Vayne 2006), dose provides the context for the biological aspect of the nexus. For example, it is considered unlikely that someone could have an experience which could be considered 'mystical' or 'transcendent' without consuming a large dose of psilocybin (Griffiths et al 2006, McKenna 1991). This is not to say that a large dose generates a 'mystical' experience essentially, it is more that the dose dependent experiences occasioned by larger doses have greater potential to enable a construction of this kind, whilst smaller doses limit the potential for constructions of boundlessness or transcendentalism.

The average dose of psilocybin considered necessary for an effect is between 50-300 plus micrograms per kilogram of body weight (mg/kg), with around 115-215 mg/kg as a 'moderate dose' and from there up to and exceeding 315 mg/kg as a 'high' dose (Hasler et al 2004). The potency of mushrooms (their psilocybin and psilocin content per gram) varies between species and between particular picked or grown blooms of the same species (Stamets 1996, Beug & Bigwood 1982), but doses can be roughly translated into mushrooms via the weight of either fresh or dried mushrooms consumed. As such a range of 1-3.5g of dried or 10-30 g fresh mushrooms for a moderate dose, up to and exceeding 5g dried or 50g fresh mushrooms for a large dose (Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011). Similar doses apply to truffles (Pellegrini et al 2013).

This kind of precision available in clinical settings was not manifest by participants. Instead dose was calculated heuristically; split into 'large' and 'moderate' within their accounts based upon the type and number of mushrooms consumed. Similarly, participants who bought mushrooms during periods of legal tolerance relied on the listings in 'Head/Smart Shops' (shops that sell 'legal highs') which describe varieties of mushroom as 'potent' or 'mild', and which sell quantities as 'moderate' or 'large' doses. A moderate dose was typically described by participants as between 20-60

‘Liberty Caps’ or 1 or fewer cultivated mushrooms, a high dose was described as 80-250 Liberty caps or 2 or more cultivated mushrooms. Participants who consumed truffles all claimed to have taken ‘large’ doses as dictated by the menus in ‘Smart Shops’, or on online drug trade forums from which they were purchased. These constructions of dose were upheld by participants regardless of how they consumed them (eaten fresh, dried, cooked, or taken in tea), and were similarly maintained when mushroom use was undertaken socially; a mushroom tea (steeping the mushrooms in hot water to extract the psilocybin) of 200 Liberty Caps was constructed as a large dose even if split between two to four people. Whilst the number of mushrooms consumed was often reported, the intensity and nature of the experience was more important in determining the potency of a dose in participant’s accounts.

Given the difficulty in gauging specific doses I have adhered to the criteria offered by participants; their self-report of a ‘large’ or ‘moderate’ dose based on an estimate or memory of the number mushrooms consumed and of a particular variety. Based on these criteria nine participants reported consuming predominantly ‘large’ doses of mushrooms: Liberty Caps, truffles and exotic varieties (Participants 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 14, 15, 19, and 22). Seven participants reported consuming exclusively ‘moderate’ doses (Participants 2, 5, 10, 12, 16, 17, and 18) and seven reported consuming a mix of large and moderate doses, often for specific purposes (Participants 6, 7, 8, 13, 20, 21 and 23).

All participants ingested magic mushrooms orally with some participants reporting the use of different methods to avoid the bitter and unpleasant taste of mushrooms, or as a means of making it easier to consume a large quantity (e.g. dried mushrooms are less ‘bulky’ than fresh). Participants ate mushrooms fresh and dried, as a ‘mushroom tea’ (steeped in hot water to extract the psilocybin, often with a tea bag) and cooked in meals, with no participant adhering to one method exclusively. Whilst it is possible these different methods of orally ingesting mushrooms may affect the quantity of psilocybin consumed, they do not qualify as different ‘routes of administration’ (Julien 2004) as the means of ingestion (through digestion) are the same. Whether means of ingestion produces differences in mushroom experiences is an interesting question for further research, though it is presently not considered as important a factor as dose (unlike with heroin for example where substantive differences are experienced between smoking and injecting the substance, Julien 2004).

In the analysis sections I will reiterate this information in the context of particular accounts offered by participants, in order to illustrate the contextual relevance of whether a large or moderate dose is associated with a particular construction.

4.4.3 Other Substance Use

As well as magic mushroom use participants were asked about their use of other substances, or when discussing mushroom experiences made comparisons with other substances. This information

is again provided for illustrative purposes; participants who have extensive experience with other psychedelic substances may make comparisons and construct similarities and differences which other participants, who have only experienced magic mushrooms, cannot. For example Letcher (2007) notes anecdotally that people who have consumed LSD and magic mushrooms contrast them; the former is described as occasioning much more ‘digital’ or geometric experiences whereas mushrooms are more ‘earthy’ and playful. Furthermore, the comparison of other substances with mushrooms positions mushrooms in particular ways which have implications for the construction of meaning (e.g. as organic or spiritual compared with synthetic or stimulant substances). By presenting this information I do not wish to suggest that participants adhered to a ‘drug use profile’ as either ‘recreational’ or ‘psychedelic’ users; the nature of other substances consumed did not dictate whether participants positioned themselves as primarily hedonistic or psychonautic magic mushroom users. As Milhet & Reynaud-Marupt (2011) suggest whilst it is possible to view participants as engaging in a particular ‘style’ of psychedelic use (in their terms ‘lavish’ recreational use, or ‘purist’ spiritual use) this must be considered ‘*within a flexible and dynamic trajectory*’ (pg. 150) of individual experience. As will be elaborated in the analysis sections whether drug use is positioned as recreational or psychonautic is more attributable to the constructions of use and motivations for consumption, rather than the taste of a participant for consuming specific substances.

All participants had tried, or repeatedly used cannabis. Seven participants exclusively used mushrooms, alcohol, and cannabis (Participants 2, 8, 12, 14, 16, 17, 21), thirteen participants had experience of ‘party drugs’ including cocaine, ‘pills’ (non-specific stimulants or ecstasy derivatives purchased as tablets), ecstasy, ketamine, and amphetamine (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, 20, 22, 23); and thirteen participants had experience with other psychedelic substances including LSD, DMT, Salvia, Mescaline and 2Ci (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 15, 18, 19, 23).

4.5 Ethics

This study was approved by the University of Bath Psychology Departmental Ethics Board.

4.5.1 Privacy and Anonymity

A key ethical consideration for this study is privacy and anonymity as it concerns people’s use of an illegal substance. Despite suggestions that drug use has become more tolerated in contemporary Western society as a result of neoliberal conceptions of ‘controlled’ and ‘appropriate’ drug use (O’Malley 2002, Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010), there persists the potential for people who consume substances to be viewed as criminal or morally deviant ‘drug abusers’ (Rødner 2005, Letcher 2007). In the current study efforts were made to protect participant’s privacy given the

socially sensitive nature of this research topic (Lee 1993). This ethical issue partly informed the data generation technique; interviews were selected after key informants raised concerns about privacy when participating in focus groups. They did not wish to be potentially 'recognised' by other people in their local community for fear that if their use of illegal drugs became known it may endanger their reputation, employment status, or social position. As such, interviews were conducted with awareness of the importance of maintaining participant privacy, at times and in places of participants choosing (Smith & Eatough 2007). When interviews were conducted in public locations they were carried out discreetly, and participants were invited to stop the interview or to reschedule if they became uncomfortable. Once interviews had been completed participants contact details and any emails or voicemails pertaining to participation in the study were deleted to further ensure privacy (as suggested by Coomber 2002).

Anonymity has been maintained in written data so that participants cannot be recognised in print (Brinkman & Kvale 2008). All participant names and the names of third parties referenced in interviews have been changed to a pseudonym during transcription. Similarly potentially identifying details (such as a job role and the names of leisure venues) have also been changed. In anonymising information provided by participants there is a balance between protecting their identities and retaining contextual information which may be relevant to why accounts are offered (Brinkman & Kvale 2008). In the present study this was attempted by changing details to broad or related but non-specific identifiers; keeping in what was important for accounts (e.g. the consumption of mushrooms in a nightclub venue) but omitting specific details (e.g. the venue's name). This technique is in keeping with both the research aims of exploring constructions of the meanings of magic mushrooms, and with the ethical imperative to protect participant's identities. Original interview recordings were erased once transcribed and anonymised.

4.5.2 Right to Withdraw and Informed Consent

The participants' right to withdraw (Brinkman & Kvale 2008) from the study was explained immediately prior to the interview and via an information sheet emailed after initial contact; participants were informed that interviews could be stopped at any point and that their data could be omitted from the study and destroyed prior to submission of the thesis. Informed consent (Brinkman & Kvale 2008) was obtained from participants via a printed consent form (of which they retained a copy) detailing the nature of the study, how confidentiality was to be managed and their right to withdraw (see Appendix 2 for information sheet and Appendix 4 for consent form). Where interviews were conducted via the telephone or through Skype, participants were read the consent form and asked for verbal confirmation that they had understood and agreed to give consent. This consent was audio recorded. The consent form was also emailed prior to interview. All participants were considered able to give informed consent; the non-addictive nature of

mushrooms reduced the likelihood of recruiting drug addicted participants who are considered a 'vulnerable' population with diminished ability to consent in substance use research (Anderson & DuBois 2007). Similarly no participants were intoxicated (which may impair consent) at the time of the interview (Aldridge & Charles 2008).

A further ethical concern in informed consent relating to vulnerability is how consent is managed in situ during the interview. Duncombe & Jessop (2012) note that 'doing rapport' (actively engaging with participants in a way that elicits openness) can seek to manage participants consent to disclose through a subtle form of researcher deception akin to salesmanship. In this regard 'false friendship' is used to elicit good responses from participants exclusively for data generation. In the current study whilst attempts were made to have good rapport with participants at no point was a deliberate effort made to charm responses from them. Similarly participants in this study were not considered a 'vulnerable' group (despite the hidden nature of the research topic) and as such were not powerless in withholding responses or refusing to answer questions (Duncombe & Jessop 2012). A process of reciprocal openness between researcher and researched regarding thoughts and experiences relevant to the topic was maintained in order to try and reduce possible deception and to promote reciprocity between researcher and participant (Skeggs 2002) [See subsequent section on Reflexivity for a fuller explanation].

4.5.3 Harm

The likelihood of harm to participants was deemed minimal in this study. A potential for harm may arise if participants are 'intoxicated' at the time of the interview, a concern pertinent to more ethnographic approaches to substance use research (Aldridge & Charles 2008). In the present study the use of a prearranged interview meant that participants were informed that the research involved retrospective recounting of previous experiences, and as such none were interviewed whilst intoxicated.

It is possible that recalling a traumatic psychedelic experience may be distressing. Existing research suggests that participants are unlikely to agree to participate in interviews recounting psychedelic experiences if the experience they had was particularly traumatising (Doblin 1991). Despite this assertion, in the current project key informants suggested that it was not damaging to recall unpleasant experiences with psychedelics and several participants openly discussed negative experiences. In order to ensure that no harm came from recounting experiences, all participants were informed that if recalling an experience became distressing the interview could be stopped, and the data could be removed from the study. A copy of contact details for drug support, advice and counselling services were made available to participants on the reverse of their consent form (see Appendix 4). Whilst this procedure may be indicative of 'over sensitivity' to the negative

impact of research participation upon participants (Miller & Bell 2012) it was considered ethically appropriate to be prepared for this unlikely occurrence.

4.5.4 Illegality

Psilocybin containing mushrooms are a Class A scheduled substance in the UK and obtaining and possessing them is prohibited by law (Walsh 2006). However, retrospective description of drug consumption does not constitute an illegal activity, neither does making hypothetical statements about intentions to consume mushrooms at an undisclosed point in the future (Walsh 2006). As all participants were aged 18 years and older the researcher was not ethically obligated to report information relating to possible illegal activity of minors. All participants were asked at the beginning of the interview to avoid offering specific details of any current serious illegal activity (such as involvement in drug manufacture or trade), in order to avoid potentially legally implicating the researcher (Coomber 2002).

4.6 Data Generation: Interviews

Single instances of interviewing were selected as the data generation technique for the present study. Interviews are often represented in methodological literature as the ‘default’ option for conducting qualitative inquiry (Briggs 1986, Roulston 2010) with critics noting that justification is seldom offered as to why this particular method is used (Potter & Hepburn 2005). Following calls for greater justification for choosing particular methods and how they relate to the conceptual underpinnings of a study (Speer 2008) I shall now offer the rationale for why interviews were selected to explore the constructions of meaning of magic mushrooms. The decision to use interviews was made for both epistemological and practical reasons.

4.6.1 Interviews and ‘The Subject’

Interviews were considered to be an appropriate means of generating data in accordance with how the subject is conceptualised in this study (see Chapter 3 Theoretical Considerations). Subjects are conceptualised in this thesis as embodied entities that actively make meaning of magic mushrooms through the relational interaction of somatosensory experiences and culturally available discourses (Blackman 2001, Burkitt 1999). Subjects are not considered to be passive producers of knowledge, or repositories of facts and objective understanding, instead they are considered to be active constructors of meaning who build accounts and make sense of things in interactive social contexts (Holstein & Gubrium 2004, Miller & Glassner 2004).

In this study interviews are conceptualised as a particular kind of social interaction where subjects’ practices of meaning construction through language and discourse can occur around a given topic,

in a particular kind of conversational context (Griffin 2007a). As Holstein & Gubrium (2004) suggest interviews (particularly ‘active’ interviews) enable an exploration of both the discourses people use to construct meaning of a phenomenon (‘*what’s*’ – the substantive content of accounts centred around a given topic) and the interactional context in which this construction takes place (‘*how’s*’ – the interactional procedures and exchange which informs how the meaning making process unfolds). By directly engaging with participants about a particular phenomenon or aspect of their lives, they are encouraged to offer constructions of their experiences and to use discourses to construct meaning around the topic under discussion (Griffin 2007a). As subjects are always involved in constructing meanings of experiential reality in everyday life, interviews represent a specific ‘dynamic meaning making occasion’ where the construction of meaning can be enacted with a particular agenda in mind (Holstein & Gubrium 2004).

4.6.2 Selection of Interviews

Interviews were selected as the means of generating data as they enable the occasioning of situated yet detailed accounts from participants about their experiences with mushrooms; accounts that offer illustrations of the available discourses used to make meaning (Martin & Stenner 2004). Interviews were deemed an appropriate method for achieving the research aims. Firstly, the ‘inductive’ aim of exploring what meanings of magic mushrooms participants construct was made possible by encouraging participants to offer narratives about experiences with magic mushrooms via open questioning (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Secondly, the ‘theoretical’ aim of exploring how magic mushroom users engage with discourses relevant to topic areas established by research and popular psychedelic literature may not have been achievable through more indirect means. ‘Direct engagement’ with participants with a particular agenda in mind (Griffin 2007a) meant that questions could be asked about specific topics, and the subsequent responses recorded. Interviews were also selected as they enabled the generation of data from individual mushroom users; the research aim was to explore a spread of meanings from a range of users with differing approaches to magic mushroom use, rather than collaborative meaning making in a group context (as in a Focus Group).

Ethical and practical limitations also affected the selection of interviews for data generation. Initial contact with key informants indicated reticence to participate in focus groups due to concerns of privacy and anonymity (see above section Ethics). Furthermore, a focus group context could have made it difficult for participants to discuss more esoteric experiences or to venture ‘out of the ordinary’ accounts for fear of ridicule or judgement by strangers. This has been considered in the context of research exploring contemporary Paganisms; where managing ‘authenticity’ can lead participants to react hostilely to those who offer outlandish claims about their spiritual or magical experiences, as they are deemed to be inauthentic or disingenuous (Coco & Woodward 2007).

Interviews also reduced the possibility of competitive storytelling; an anecdotal problem raised by my key informants where the recounting of extreme experiences can serve to demonstrate status or expertise within psychedelic culture, or as one participant put it where *‘people get tripped out trying to out-trip each other’* (Participant 1, Alan, email communication). Because magic mushroom users were perceived as a hidden and sensitive population efforts were made to accommodate these concerns (Lee 1993) with interviews providing an ethically acceptable research strategy as participants were strangers. Lastly, the geographical spread of the participants (often with only one or two participants recruited from a locality), and subsequent need to use distance interviewing techniques, would have rendered focus groups difficult to accomplish.

4.6.3 Style of Interview- Narrative, Semi-structured, and Active/Conversational

In designing interviews a combination of elements from narrative (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, Elliot 2005), semi-structured (Smith 1995), and active or conversational (Holstein & Gubrium 2004, Rubin & Rubin 2005) interviews was employed. This decision was led by the research question and aims where exploration of both user generated constructions of meaning (inductive or ‘bottom up’) and constructions based upon areas of theoretical interest from relevant literature (theoretical or ‘top down’) were sought. It should be noted an interview schedule was used to frame all questions, whether inductive or theoretically focused.

Elements of narrative interviewing were employed to explore the inductive aspects of the research aims, via an invitation to participants to tell stories of their experiences (Elliot 2005). Narrative interviewing seeks to reduce the imposition of the researchers’ demands (in terms of topic selection and question wording) upon the respondent which may constrain their constructions of meaning; a limitation of traditional interviewing (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). By getting people to narrate stories of their experiences with the interviewer playing the role of an active listener, a freer account of meaning from the participant’s perspective is obtained (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). In the present study this was attempted via the use of open questions designed to elicit a story or account (Elliot 2005). The questions asked were general and invited biographical construction (‘tell me about yourself and magic mushrooms’), and indexical where participants were encouraged to *‘anchor’* their *‘accounts to events that actually happened’* (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, pg. 35), such as ‘can you tell me about any significant experiences you had with magic mushrooms?’ Within the interview schedule four initial prompt questions asking participants about their relationship with magic mushrooms informed the narrative aspect of the method (history of use, significant experiences, the appeal of magic mushrooms, and how they feel about their experiences- see Appendix 5 for interview schedule).

The advantage of this approach is that participants are invited to construct the meaning of magic mushrooms for them via reflection upon their own experiences and lives. This seeks achieve the research aim of obtaining inductive constructions, rather than responses to specific questions about presupposed aspects of magic mushroom use selected by the researcher. However, this advantage is also a limitation; the narrative approach in isolation does not allow for exploration of particular areas of theoretical interest, as the intention is to generate data salient to the participant themselves in exploration of a topic (Elliot 2005). For instance in Hollway & Jefferson's (2003) example the topic 'fear of crime' was explored by encouraging people to tell personal stories of general anxiety. In the current study narrative style interviewing alone was not considered sufficient for achieving the research aims. The second element to the research aims was an exploration of areas of theoretical interest suggested by the academic and popular literature concerning magic mushrooms. It could not be guaranteed that these areas would spontaneously arise in the narrative accounts offered by participants, and so a more traditional semi-structured interview (Smith 1995, Smith & Eatough 2007) style was also undertaken.

Semi-structured interviewing ensured that topics of interest based upon existing academic and popular psychedelic literature were discussed, whilst enabling the freedom to explore potentially unforeseen avenues of talk during conversational exchange (Smith 1995, Smith & Eatough 2007). The theoretically informed topics addressed in interviews were discourses of hedonism (recreational drug use and pleasure), psychology (the mushrooms effects upon brain and mind), animism (constructions of mushrooms as occasioning encounters with non-human entities) and entheogenic discourse (spiritual constructions of mushrooms). Within the interview schedule these topics were introduced as four unscripted prompts for the researcher, and questions based on these prompts were asked in a flexible and organic manner depending upon participant response and the flow of conversation (Smith 1995). Participants were explicitly asked about their experiences regarding, or their 'thoughts' upon, these discourses whether or not they had arisen within their narrativised accounting. It was assumed that if participants responding to semi structured questions had no relevant experience of the phenomena in question, or could offer no construction about it (due to unawareness etc.) they would state so (Duncombe & Jessop 2012), and this did occur in interviews.

In designing the interview schedule and deploying different 'styles' of interview I have attempted in this study to synthesise the best of both approaches; the inductive storied elements of narrative interviewing which allow for unexpected constructions to arise (Hollway & Jefferson 2000) and the focused yet flexible approach of semi structured interviewing which allows exploration of specific topics of interest to the researcher (Smith 1995, Smith & Eatough 2007).

When conducting interviews ‘active’ interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium 2004) was undertaken; interviews were conducted as a meaning making occasion between the interviewer and interviewee, and were entered into as a conversation with an agenda, rather than a spoken survey. This was applied to both semi-structured questioning and invitations to produce narratives. Each interview was conducted as a ‘conversational partnership’ (Rubin & Rubin 2005) where participants were actively engaged with, including the exchange of anecdotes and opinions on the part of the interviewer (Holstein & Gubrium 2004). This more conversational approach was interspersed with the use of the interview schedule to establish a topic, with subsequent discussion being flexible. The intention behind this approach was firstly to put participants at ease in discussing something personal and which can be seen as socially questionable (Lee 1993); magic mushrooms are illegal and much stigma still surrounds drug use (O’Malley 2002). Secondly, the intention was to attempt to reduce (as far as possible), any potential power imbalance brought about by the social role of the researcher as ‘psychologist’ ‘expert’ or ‘moral judge’ (Rubin & Rubin 2005, Skeggs 2002). If participants felt they were being judged or scrutinised through rigid application of set questions, rather than entered into a dialogue with as persons this may have made them defensive or uncomfortable, which could have been distressing (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Lastly, the epistemological orientation of the project considers the making of meaning through discourse as occurring principally in social interaction; participants are not ‘passive vessels’ which provide answers to questions as cognitive monologues (Potter & Hepburn 2005), but are active constructors of knowledge (Holstein & Gubrium 2004). As such, the interviewer must also participate in this construction so meaning can be made.

A conversational interview technique may be criticised as too ‘informal’ with the potential for digression leading to subsequent poverty of data (Rubin & Rubin 2005). Digression was considered unproblematic in this study as it was in keeping with the flexible intention of the composite interview style. If interview exchange strayed too far from the topic in question, the use of an interview schedule enabled the interview to return to topic if necessary.

A further criticism of interviewing is that the interviewer and their responses are typically scrubbed from data (Potter & Hepburn 2005). In the current study, once completed interviews were analysed as ‘*piece[s] of social interaction in their own right*’ (Potter & Wetherell 1995 p.85) where meaning making occurs between interviewer and interviewee as persons engaged in conversation (Holstein & Gubrium 2004, Rubin & Rubin 2005). As such, the interviewers’ responses have been included in the data, to avoid representing participant’s accounts as monologue responses to a spoken survey, or to omit the interviewers’ role in setting up particular exchanges (Davies & Harre 1999).

By combining elements of these approaches it is hoped that the data produced adequately meets the aims of the study, whilst participants felt no distress or imposition in taking part.

4.6.4 Conducting Interviews: Face-to Face, Skype and Telephone

'Face-to-face' interviews were originally intended as the only interview method, but during initial recruitment it became apparent that some key informants were currently located outside of the UK for employment or study. These participants were important to the study based on inclusion criteria, and it became necessary to consider distance interview methods (Novick 2008, Holt 2010). Distance methods were considered appropriate to the style of interview undertaken, as previous research has successfully used the telephone for semi-structured and narrative interviews (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004, Holt 2010).

Skype internet video call software and telephones were selected as distance interview methods. Two different methods were selected in order to reduce potential exclusion of participants who lacked either a telephone or Skype. Previous research has effectively utilised a combination of face-to-face and telephone or Skype interviews to obtain a wider geographical sample of participants, and for ethical and practical issues of privacy and convenience (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004, Holt 2010, Hanna 2012). In the present study the option of taking part in a face-to-face, Skype or telephone interview was included in the information sheet emailed to participants after their initial expression of interest (see Appendix 2). Regardless of geographical location all participants were given the option of being interviewed via distance methods, in order to increase participant control in the research process, to improve flexibility and access for those who may find it hard to attend an in person interview, and to capitalise on potential advantages for privacy when discussing a sensitive topic (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004, Holt 2010).

Across all modalities interviews ranged in duration (dependent upon participant responses and the flow of conversation) from 30minutes to 2hours 30minutes with an average length of 1hour 30minutes.

Face to face interviews

18 participants were interviewed face-to-face in places of their choosing including their residences, cafes, and the researcher's University office. Participants were invited to select the location of the interview to increase their control in the research process, and to set them at ease in discussing a potentially sensitive topic (Rappaport & Stewart 1997, Lee 1993). All interviews were digital audio recorded via a discrete yet visible recorder.

Skype

2 participants were interviewed via Skype, due to their geographical location. Skype interviews were conducted in the same manner as face-to-face interviews, and are the closest analogue to face-to-face interaction; participant and interviewer are able to see each other via webcams and converse

through microphones (Hanna 2012). In the current study I did not encounter any ‘technical hitches’ such as video link failure (reported by Hanna 2012). Skype calls require users to ‘add’ one another to a contact list. Contact details were exchanged via email and were deleted once interviews were completed.

Telephone

3 participants were interviewed via telephone, due to geographical distance (2) and personal preference (1). Telephone interviews were conducted in the same manner as other interviews, but without visual exchange. Participants’ telephone numbers were deleted after the interview to protect privacy. At the start of each call participants were informed when the audio recorder was activated. The quality of telephone interviews is affected by the telephone skills of both parties; such as if interviewer or interviewees are domineering (Stephens 2007) or taciturn (Holt 2010). In the current study both the researcher and interviewees were competent telephone users, as evidenced by the data.

Methodological considerations of distance and face-to-face interviewing

The use of different modes of interviewing raises methodological considerations. The common assumption in qualitative research is that face-to-face interviews represent the ideal mode of interviewing (Novick 2008). I shall argue that face-to-face, Skype and telephone interviews can produce data of similar value, richness and depth, and enable data generation which is in keeping with the aims and research question of the current study.

Distance interview methods remove the physical presence of researcher and researched from the research encounter. It is often assumed that the physical (or at least visual) presence of interviewer and participant is necessary to elicit rich data and to establish rapport via non-verbal cues; namely body language and facial expression (Rubin & Rubin 2005). Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) challenge this assumption; arguing that auditory cues can be read in telephone interviews (hesitation, tone and intonation), alerting researchers to prompt participants, or to attend to a participant’s emotional state if necessary. Similarly, rapport can be established on a telephone through tone, paralinguistic sounds (indicators of agreement etc.) and verbal exchange (Holt 2010). The assumption that the absence of non-verbal cues diminishes data quality is not supported by the methodological literature concerning telephone interviewing (see Novick 2008 for a review). In the present study attention was paid to participant’s verbal and where appropriate non-verbal cues through active listening (Holstein & Gubrium 2004) to manage rapport and engagement in all interview modes.

Furthermore, using distance interview methods reduces the potential for gathering ‘contextual’ data; ‘ethnographic’ observational elements of research encounters, such as participant dress and

possessions (visible in their homes) which may offer additional insight beyond spoken accounts (Novick 2008, Holt 2010). In the current study contextual data has not been included as a data source, as it was not possible to access this data for all participants; not only those interviewed via telephone and Skype, but also those who were interviewed face-to-face in public places. Where contextual data was available (face-to-face interviews conducted in participant's homes) it has been disregarded in analysis.

The omission of non-verbal cues and contextual data is in keeping with the epistemological focus of this project; which is on the content of people's accounts and constructions of meaning produced through interactive talk (Edly 2001). This is not to disregard the potential import of the extra-linguistic in the process of data generation (emphasised by Hollway & Jefferson 2000, pg. 69), but the omission of these as data sources mean that face-to-face, telephone and Skype interviews are seen as generating a comparable data type. All are 'real time' conversational modalities utilising spoken talk, enabling the production of typed transcripts which are the objects of analysis (Hanna 2012, Holt 2010). Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) conducted a systematic comparison of telephone and face-to-face interviews and found no difference in the quantity, depth, and nature of the data generated. A similarly comparable quality of data is assumed in the present study across the three modalities. Despite arguing that different interview modalities provide data of comparable richness and depth, in order to be transparent about the methods used all extracts from participants interviewed via Skype or Telephone are labelled as such in analysis chapters.

4.6.3 Criticisms of Interviewing: Interview Practice, Artificiality, and 'Naturalistic Records'

It is necessary to consider criticisms of interviewing and to respond to them to argue for why interviews are an appropriate means of generating data, and to highlight the limitations of this method for the current study. Firstly, I shall attend to criticisms of interview practice (the conducting of interviews), and secondly to criticisms of artificiality, with comparison of interviews to naturalistic records (Speer 2008, Potter & Hepburn 2005).

Interview Practice

I have already addressed some of the criticisms of interview practice in the above sections detailing the 'Style of Interview' and 'Conducting Interviews'. These criticisms include the 'typical' deletion of the interviewer from data extracts, disregard for interviews as social interactions, and treatment of participants' accounts as cognitive monologues (Potter & Hepburn 2005). Response to these criticisms underpins the rationale for conducting active conversational interviews (Holstein & Gubrium 2004), including the interviewers' utterances in data analysis, and constructing the subject as an embodied discourse user (Blackman 2001). Another 'typical' problem with interview practice is the omission of details relating to the 'task understanding' (what participants are told the

interview concerns) and the ‘category recruitment’ (how participants are conceptualised and how this translates into recruitment) in interviews (Potter & Hepburn 2005). I have addressed these issues detail; see the section in this chapter upon ‘Sampling’, and Appendix 2 for the Information Sheet provided to participants.

Artificiality

The main criticism of interview methods is that they are an artificial situation created by the researcher with a specific agenda in mind and therefore do not relate to real world occurrences of the phenomena in question (Speer 2008, Potter & Hepburn 2005). Responses from participants are elicited by researchers, and as such interview talk is seen as the product of the interview interaction (the questions asked by the interview and the dynamics of exchange in situ), rather than as indicative of anything beyond the interview (Potter & Hepburn 2005). Whilst this criticism can in part be attended to through theoretical orientation, it does raise a challenge which requires discussion.

The decision to ‘topicalize’ an aspect of social reality (Speer 2008) and to impose a research agenda in order to explore it is the first point of criticism. Potter & Hepburn (2005) argue that interviews result in data which is influenced by the research agenda and shaped according to the constructed categories of social science. These are imposed explicitly through the questions asked, and implicitly as researchers bring theoretical frames of reference and assumptions to interviews. I would argue in accordance with Stenner (1993) that all research endeavour (generating data, conducting analysis, presenting discussions, setting questions, etc.) is an act of construction by the researcher, that research agenda and social science categorisation are unavoidable. Potter & Hepburn’s point does however draw attention to the additional level of construction brought about by conducting interviews; there is an unavoidable element of contrivance.

However, in the current research project this artificiality cannot be mitigated; as Speer (2008) argues contrived methods and ‘topicalization’ are necessary to render a phenomenon visible and ‘studiable’ when the phenomenon is not typically visible in the social world, seldom arises in conventional social contexts, and if it refers to a hidden or sensitive topic. Magic mushroom use and the construction of the experiences it occasions meets all three of these criteria: it is a hidden illegal aspect of the social world, which is not ubiquitous, or commonly discussed. In conducting interviews I have endeavoured to make the phenomena visible through ‘topicalization’, with the inherent limitations that come with this. Furthermore the Foucauldian (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2008) orientation of this project to both subjects and discourse means that there is a degree of cross over between the social science categories and the way people talk about a phenomena, as Potter & Hepburn (2005:292) note ‘*Foucauldians and others have argued, everyday talk can involve a range of ‘sedimentations’ or earlier ‘theoretical’ notions as the languages of*

psychoanalysis, Marxism, symbolic interactionism and so on become parts of peoples conversational currency'. I am attempting to create a context through interviewing where these 'sedimentations' (in the form of discourses pertinent to magic mushroom use) can be explored through the construction of meaning around a topic, although it is undeniable that there is a degree of artificiality in the research exchange.

Fundamental to the above criticisms is doubt about the value of data generated in interviews beyond the interview context (Potter & Hepburn 2005, Speer 2008). Because the data generated has been 'got up' by the researcher for a specific purpose in a directed interaction it is seen as solely about the interaction and interview itself. I disagree; whilst construction is unavoidable, the theoretical orientation taken in this research project means that what is said in interviews can be seen to relate in some way to the world beyond it. As Griffin (2007a) argues the broader ideological and discursive context plays a part in encounters, and it is this that tells us something about the phenomena. Martin & Stenner (2004) argue the same in the context of qualitative drug research; the discourses participants use to construct their experiences with drugs have a life beyond the interview context and are not solely the product of conversational exchange. Miller & Glassner (2004) make a similar point arguing that knowledge of social worlds can be obtained through interviewing because participants construct and experience social phenomena outside of, regardless of, and within interviews- whilst interviews represent a particular type of social interaction this does not exclude them from eliciting accounts which are comparable to other social interactions. Whilst a degree of artificiality is unavoidable in interviews, attention to the interactional components of interviews exclusively misses much of the substantive content of the phenomena in question (Holstein & Gubrium 2004). As such, I hope to attend to the interactional elements in interview data through its presentation and in analysis, but the more substantive content of accounts shall remain the focus.

Naturalistic Records: Online Resources

An attempt to overcome the limitations of artificiality in interviews is to use naturalistic records; encounters and exchanges between people that pass the 'dead social scientist test'- those that would have occurred regardless of the presence or absence of the researcher and their agenda (Potter 2002). The most appropriate data of this type for magic mushroom use are online psychedelic drugs forums (Boyer et al 2007, Montagne 2008), such as Erowid.org or shroomery.org, which allow users of psychedelic drugs to post experience accounts ('trip reports') and discuss drug experiences anonymously with other users from around the world. The use of these naturalistic records was considered for this study, and was rejected for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it is possible that more casual and hedonistic users of mushrooms would not have been represented in this data set; the reports provided by people on Erowid.org and associated sites tend

to be representative of a ‘psychonautic’ or ‘enthusiast’ use of mushrooms rather than those from people whose ‘style’ of mushroom use is more recreational. The intention of the project was to obtain constructions from a variety of mushroom users and forum data may miss those magic mushroom users who do not feel motivated to post narratives online for others to read. Secondly, the exploratory nature of this project meant that the ability to ask direct questions was considered important, as the dialogue between researcher and participant enabled an active construction of magic mushroom use and its meaning through interaction. Areas of interest or oblique references to topics could be followed up immediately through direct engagement with participants, something which cannot be undertaken with forum data.

4.7 Reflexivity

4.7.1 The Need for Reflexive Accounting: Construction and Co-construction

It is important to consider the impact of the subjectivities of researcher and researched in the co-construction of accounts within interview interaction (Finlay 2002). My subjectivity as researcher shapes the conducting of project, the production of data, and its analysis (Finlay 2002, Stenner 1993). Similarly, the possible perceptions of me and my role by participants may have affected the data generated (Langhout 2006). In the current project the main areas for reflexive consideration are my stake and interest as a researcher, how my role as researcher was perceived by participants (my being ‘a psychologist’), and a ‘reluctant reflexivity’ concerning my ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ status (Measham & More 2006, Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009) within the field of magic mushrooms.

Whilst I partially engaged in reflexive practice whilst undertaking the research (Finlay 2002) (making changes to research design based on participant concern, adopting active interview methods to reduce power imbalance, analysing my utterances in data extracts, etc.), this thesis does not incorporate a reflexive methodology. Instead this reflexivity section is an attempt to inform the reader of the potential effects of stake and interest, insider/outsider status, and participant’s perceptions of me, in the co-construction of accounts of mushroom use.

4.7.2 Researchers Stake and Interest

The project has been designed and conducted by me out of my interest, making my engagement in the project vested. As such, it is necessary to reflect upon my personal relationship to the topic (Finlay 2002). My conducting of the research is informed by personal and academic interest in research and literature concerning psilocybin, both from undergraduate and masters’ degree study (initially psychopharmacological, and subsequently social psychological research), and personal interest in popular psychedelic writing. It is also informed by my interest in psychedelics as

substances which occasion profound and unusual experiences and how alterations to consciousness are made meaningful and understood through discourse. As such, this study is informed by my combined academic and personal interests in psychedelic substances, unusual experiences, and the construction of meaning through discourse.

I consider myself to be somewhat positively biased regarding magic mushrooms, their recreational or spiritual use, and the experiences they occasion. The reading of research and policy literature has made me consider mushrooms as a relatively (though not entirely) safe substance, and their illegality as politically motivated rather than for concerns of public safety and health (Walsh 2006, Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & Brink 2011). I consider an individual's use of psychedelic drugs as a matter of personal choice. Whilst I try to maintain an 'open mind' with regard to the various constructions that can be offered of mushroom experiences (psychological, recreational and neo-shamanic), I am a student of critical social psychology so tend towards a personal interpretation that considers all constructions as cultural products rather than any one as representing a 'true' account.

In interviews I am engaged in the active construction of knowledge with participants, I set the research questions, and decided upon the way analyses is conducted; as such all research decisions are informed by my subjectivity and a different researcher may have conducted a different study and analysis (Finlay 2002, Stenner 1993). Whilst this is an unavoidable aspect of the research, it is not necessarily a limitation, as all research is shaped by researcher stake and interest (Stenner 1993). As such, my subjective interest underpins the analytic and research design focus on certain aspects of magic mushroom use and its construction (such as hedonistic, entheogenic, and animistic aspects of experiences) as opposed to others (e.g. the issue of gender or ethnicity in psychedelics use).

4.7.3 Researcher and Participant's Perceptions: 'Psychologist'

My position as a researcher and a student of social psychology may have influenced the interaction with participants. Whilst I made efforts to mitigate this through active interviewing, personal disclosure, and managing rapport it cannot be guaranteed that this did not in some way affect the data obtained, as participants inevitably form views of researchers (Measham & Moore 2006). As a participant in this study states in the extract below:

***ERICA:** I can understand it just being something in my brain you know, some chemical, you are a psychologist you know how this kind of thing works*

Pg. 9-10, 388-389 [Participant 17]

This extract positions me as a psychologist and implies that particular understandings and knowledge are available to me (e.g. of brains and psychopharmacology). Whilst Erica was the only participant to make explicit reference to my being a psychology student, it is possible that this perception affected the accounts provided by participants. However, the majority of participants appeared to engage with me in open and reciprocal ways, with a minority of instances where participants expressed initial disclaimers or trepidation when providing esoteric accounts (e.g. encountering pixie like entities when on mushrooms and asserting that they exist). I attempted to manage this trepidation in research encounters through reassurance and evident non-judgement, and when relevant in analysis I declare when I believe this trepidation is expressed (see analysis Chapter 5 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Do’, pg. 123, Extract Olivia for an example). I attempted to mitigate participant perception of me as ‘psychology student’ and any power imbalance this may occasion through reciprocity (Holstein & Grubman 2008) and evident open mindedness, but it may still have partially influenced data. The alternative would have been to attempt using deception in interviews, which is ethically inappropriate (Griffin & Bengry-Howell 2008).

4.7.4 Insider/Outsider Status and Psychedelic Drug Use

Insider or outsider (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009) status in illicit drug research concerns consumption or abstention from the substance researched (Measham & Moore 2006); psilocybin mushrooms in the present study. Reflexively discussing one’s personal relationship with the substance being researched is difficult. As the MDMA researcher Charles Grob states, researchers are ‘*damned if they have taken drugs and damned if they haven’t*’ (cited pg. 23, Measham & Moore 2006). Declaring yourself an ‘insider’ who has taken the drug creates the potential for losing academic ‘respectability’ due to the negative perception of drug users, or for being perceived as ‘biased’ by your relationship with the substance (Measham & Moore 2006). Conversely, being an ‘outsider’ can also be viewed negatively, your findings may be questioned because you lack experiential understanding of the substance (Measham & Moore 2006). In spite of the risk of being perceived in a particular way I feel it necessary to engage in ‘reluctant reflexivity’ (Measham & Moore 2006) and declare that at the time of conducting interviews I have not experienced psilocybin mushrooms. Rather than provide a confessional justification for my abstention from magic mushrooms, I wish instead to explore the notion of ‘insider/outsider’ status.

Being an ‘insider’ does not mean that a researcher ‘knows’ an experience in its entirety; there is individual and contextual variability between the experiences of a given social phenomena (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009, Measham & Moore 2006). As such, had I been a magic mushroom user any experiences I may have had with magic mushrooms are likely to be as subjective and as varied as those of my participants, and accordingly my constructions of such experiences (based on the

discursive configurations available to me) would be both different and similar to participant's constructions of meaning. It is unlikely I would gain a special insight into the complex and varied constructions my participants offer of magic mushroom use through subjective experience alone.

Similarly, being an 'outsider' does not render one incapable of appreciating and understanding what is constructed, though insight into aspects of experiences may be hindered (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009). There is an equal value to research conducted by those who abstain from a substance as there is from those who are users (Measham & Moore 2006). In the current study my not having consumed mushrooms does not render me incapable of identifying the discourses participants use to construct their meaning. However, certain aspects of what is constructed may be harder for me to comprehend or may be misinterpreted without having experienced magic mushrooms; e.g. ineffability is hard to conceptualise and understand other than through subjective experience. As such, there are overlapping positive and negative aspects to occupying either status, but neither excludes, nor guarantees, the potential for understanding.

In reflecting on my outsider status, if questions regarding my potential use of magic mushrooms arose in interviews I was honest with participants that I have not taken them and all appeared to react positively to this admission. Several participants commented that my status as a non-user should render me more objective; arguing that I cannot bring personal experiential biases about mushrooms experiences and appropriate use to their accounts (I am however dubious of this understanding as all research is infused with bias, Finlay 2002, Stenner 1993). Despite this, I cannot guarantee that participants did not perceive me as in some way inauthentic due to my abstention, although none made this evident. Participants strongly recommended that I take mushrooms at the completion of the project in order to deepen my subjective (rather than academic) understanding through experiential knowledge, and for personal insight and enjoyment. I did not 'out' myself as a mushroom non-user at the start of interviews, however nor did I attempt to deceive participants into thinking I had experience of magic mushrooms. Instead I tried to take a position as interested in participant's experiences and accounts, and as having some partial 'academic' familiarity with the phenomenon (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle 2009).

Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle (2009) challenge the dichotomy of insider and outsider, arguing that researchers occupy 'a space between' these positions and never possess truly insider or outsider status. Being a 'researcher' means that analytic attention is paid to the phenomena and we are exposed to relevant literature, which forces us into being more or less of an insider/outsider. A similar argument is made by Measham & Moore (2006) that it is better to consider researchers as 'partial' insiders /outsiders; academic knowledge and analysis of the phenomena as a researcher can trouble insider status and engagement with the phenomena can trouble outsider status. My academic familiarity with magic mushrooms flexibly affected my insider/outsider status; in some

exchanges I was more an insider and others more an outsider. For example, my knowledge of specialist discourses (e.g. neo-shamanism) obtained by reading popular literature concerning psychedelics (e.g. the writings of McKenna 1991, 1992), enabled me to take a position as partial insider. In contrast, my unfamiliarity with the PsyTrance party scene and of the role of magic mushrooms within it rendered me more of an outsider. In all interviews I attempted to respond honestly to questions participants asked of me; about the study, about my opinions regarding the legality of magic mushrooms, and of my own substance use and abstention. I hope that my admission of abstention has not, as Grob might say, rendered me '*damned that I haven't*' and I would like to state that declaring you have not done the drugs is as much a form of 'reluctant reflexivity' (Measham & Moore 2006) as declaring that you have.

4.8 Analytic Strategy

4.8.1 Transcription

Transcription of interviews involved repeated listening to audio recordings and simultaneous typing of speech into text. Interviews were transcribed in their entirety and when completed were reviewed whilst re-listening to recordings to check accuracy. Despite attempts to ensure accuracy transcripts are not transparent presentations of interviews on the page (O'Connell & Kowal 1995); transcription is a rhetorical act of construction undertaken by the researcher (Mishler 1991, Smith, Hollway & Mishler 2005). The representation of talk as text creates an unavoidable distance between the interviews as they occurred and transcripts of them (Mishler 1991), but transcription is the only means of rendering spoken language accessible analytically (O'Connell & Kowal 1995). Decisions about how to present transcription may in turn influence how analysis is undertaken and how discourses are interpreted and identified (Mishler 1991). This must be considered in the current study, although overcoming the constructive nature of transcription is largely unavoidable (Smith, Hollway & Mishler 2005).

The representational practice undertaken was intended to be conducive to the research focus and use of a more Foucauldian informed analytic approach (Griffin 2007b). The inclusion of extra linguistic, paralinguistic and prosodic elements of spoken language, such as intonation and tone (O'Connell & Kowal 1995) was deemed to be unnecessary for the current study as the analytic focus is upon the content of accounts (Edley 2001, Smith, Hollway & Mishler 2005). However, indicators of pause were included, with a comma representing a standard breath, and parenthesis () indicating longer pauses. Extra discursive elements pertinent to exchange (primarily laughter) were also identified in brackets. [See Appendix 6 for a key to the transcription style used.]

4.8.2 Analytic Process: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Analysis of interview data was undertaken using a Foucauldian informed Discourse Analytic approach (Parker 1994, Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). In detailing the variant of this approach that I employed I firstly elaborate what makes this analysis a ‘Foucauldian’ analysis; secondly, I detail the practical steps of analysis undertaken; and thirdly, offer a justification for the style of analysis undertaken. (For a description and explanation of the use of the concept of Foucauldian discourse in this thesis, see Chapter 3: Theoretical Considerations).

Discourse analysis is a term applied to a varied set of analytic approaches which are concerned with the situated, generative and constructive role of language in constituting social reality (Taylor 2001, Willig 2008). Foucauldian, or more accurately, ‘Foucauldian informed’ discourse analysis (Willig 2008) is a particular branch of discourse analysis informed by the concepts and philosophy of Michel Foucault. Foucault was a historian and philosopher applying his analytic focus to historical sources and the practices of the social sciences (Rabinow 1991). As such, the development of ‘Foucauldian Discourse Analysis’ (FDA) in psychology involves the application of a theoretical orientation or a set of concepts informed by Foucault, rather than being a strict adherence to the analytic methods of archaeology and genealogy he developed (Yates & Hiles 2010, Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). The form of Foucauldian informed analysis undertaken in the current thesis is therefore best thought of as an orientation to data, and an interpretation and operationalization of Foucault’s concepts of discourse and power (as described in Chapter 3 Theoretical Considerations).

Practicalities of Analysis: Generating Discourses

There is no one way of conducting Foucauldian analysis, nor is there a methodological ‘recipe’ for its completion (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008, Wiggins & Riley 2010). As such, I have combined aspects of different guidelines for conducting FDA, focusing upon those which applied the method to interview texts.

Preliminary data analysis was completed by hand coding interview transcripts. Each interview transcript was read repeatedly and coded by underlining, highlighting, and writing notes in order to identify discursive constructions (Willig 2008); instances of talk around a particular object, subject, or aspect of mushroom use and its meaning. For example, all instances of talk wherein participants constructed magic mushrooms in ‘psychological’ terms; as psychoactive and as affecting the mind or brain. Discursive constructions were decided based upon a combination of inductive and theoretical coding (Wiggins & Riley 2010, Braun & Clarke 2006). Inductive coding involved the selection of instances of talk based on repeated or salient constructions offered by participants; for example, repeated and unforeseen references to magic mushrooms as products of the ‘natural

world'. Theoretical coding involved the targeted searching for instances of talk regarding topics of interest raised by the interviewer during discussion (Braun & Clarke 2006). For example, references to hedonism, spirituality, animism- the topics of interest included in the interview schedule. In collating discursive constructions both explicit and oblique references to aspects of magic mushroom use were included (Wiggins & Riley 2010, Martin & Stenner 2004). Returning to the example of 'psychological' constructions of magic mushrooms, this would be both explicit instances such as describing magic mushrooms as modulating the brain and eliciting hallucinations, as well as oblique references such as mushrooms 'messing with your head'.

Once coding of the data set was complete transcripts were divided into extracts based on a given set of discursive configurations. Transcripts were divided into bounded instances of talk which address a particular object, experience or class of objects and experiences (Willig 2008, Wiggins & Riley 2010). Initially all instances of talk pertaining to the construction of a particular object or subject (e.g. the construction of magic mushroom use as spiritual) were collated as extracts for all participants (Willig 2008). Extracts were then cut up by hand, sorted and laid out in conceptual structures in order to interrogate the proposed discourse they related too (Wiggins & Riley 2010). For instance, all participant references to magic mushrooms as 'psychological' were initially collated, and were then subdivided into those which were 'neurological' and those concerning 'beliefs'. This was an iterative process of sorting and exploring conceptual linkages in order to identify discourses as relatively coherent sets of statements and constructions which constitute a phenomenon or object (Hall 1997).

When considered in interactive talk discourses are (re)productive of the objects they constitute: discourses are taken up by participants and 'produce' and make available particular ways of speaking and conceptualising aspects of mushroom use, but these discourses are also moulded and 'reproduced' idiosyncratically in the context of a particular participants account (Parker 1992, Blackman 2001). As such, in generating and identifying discourses I also included extracts and explored conceptual linkages which evidence the multiple, varied, and potentially contradictory ways participants used a given discourse (Willig 2008, Parker 1994). Discourses were labelled using appropriate terminology based upon sensible reflection of the content of the discourse (Parker 1994).

During this process the number of extracts was reduced to a core set for each discourse which I felt best exemplified the different ways a particular discourse was constructed, negotiated and mobilised (Martin & Stenner 2004, Willig 2008). As such, it has not been possible to include all participants' data to evidence each discourse, and in written analysis I have attempted to select those extracts which best represent an aspect of a given discourse, including oppositional constructions where appropriate (Willig 2008, Parker 1994). Whilst a relatively small number of

extracts are used to evidence the arguments made in analysis, each one is seldom a single instance of a particular construction; other participants will have typically offered similar, but not identical, constructions which have contributed to the broader formation of the discourse. However, if an extract was representative of a singular utilisation of a discourse within the data set I have stated so in analysis (for an example see Chapter 6, 'What Magic Mushrooms Are' Pg. 157, analysis of Sam's scepticism towards nature as benign).

Once established through selected extracts, discourses were elaborated through written analysis. Each extract was individually analysed to explore the action orientation, positioning, and construction within a specific instance of talk (Willig 2008, Parker 1994); how a particular participant used an aspect of the discourse, or negotiated multiple discourses to construct or represent an argument, object, or subject (Parker 1994, Wiggins & Riley 2010). Analysis was then expanded beyond extracts to the relationship between extracts; considering how the broader discourse is organised between accounts and across participants through overlapping and contrasting ways of speaking (Parker 1994). For example, using multiple extracts with varied constructions to demonstrate how 'psychological discourse' serves to constitute magic mushroom experiences as products of the brain and mind.

The intention in analysing both data extracts and the constructions between extracts was to demonstrate how the discourse operates to construct versions of reality across participants, and also to include the moment to moment detail within accounts where a discourse is used (Wiggins & Riley 2010). As such, the considerations of construction (how an object is constituted through talk), variation (how different constructions are manifest), and function (what purpose these constructions serve) (Potter & Wetherell 1987) were applied at the level of extract analysis and to the broader relationships between extracts. Not only were specific discourses identified but extracts which exemplified the relationships between discourses or which challenged a particular discourse were also included and analysed in a similar manner, in order to fully explore how a discourse is negotiated in the construction of meaning across the data set (Parker 1992, 1994).

Justification of the Analytic Strategy

In this section I will justify my use of this particular interpretation of Foucauldian discourse analysis on the present data. Some theorists would not consider the present analysis a 'true' Foucauldian discourse analysis because I have not engaged in a conventional critical genealogy of other historical textual sources (Arribas-Ayallon 2008, Hook 2001, 2005). Similarly my concern with discourse as produced in spoken interaction can be seen as an analysis more 'of the moment' than one which attempts to historically locate magic mushroom using subjects (Hook 2001). A

genealogical analysis (e.g. in the style of Rose 1990²²) of the discourses presented in this thesis would be an interesting project for further research. However, I argue that the present analysis is Foucauldian, or more specifically is a Foucauldian informed discourse analysis.

Yates & Hiles (2010, pg. 52) argue that Foucault intended for his body of work not to be considered as a '*methodologically prescriptive oeuvre*', but instead invited theorists to use his concepts and methods as an adaptable set of tools or '*gadgets*'. As such, they can be used to function in different ways within the field of critical psychology and can inspire new analyses (Parker 2013). In this regard, in keeping with the assumptions and practices of Foucauldian analysis in social psychology (Wiggins & Riley 2010, Parker 1994, Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008) I have applied the core concept of Foucault's notion of discourse to my analysis of interview transcripts in the present study. I have focused analytic attention upon the ways in which versions of reality (concerning magic mushroom use and associated experiences) are constructed within texts (interview transcripts) (Parker 1994) through negotiation of socially, culturally and historically situated understandings (discourses) (Hall 1997). In the present analysis, the social, cultural and historical location of discourses has not been completed through a conventional genealogy; rather it has been addressed through a critical review of a variety of research literatures (Chapter 2) and through situation in the historical narrative of magic mushroom use in the West (Chapter 1).

I conceptualise participants constructions of meaning as drawn from discourses which are used to (re)produce objects, subjects, experiences, and other aspects of the social world (Hall 1997). I also explore the implications of these constructions for the constitution of subjects and objects, through a consideration of Foucault's conception of power (Foucault 1980).

Power in FDA concerns the relationships between discourses; how particular discourses operate in 'truth' to allow and inhibit certain ways of speaking and constructing the phenomena in question (Hall 1997, Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008). Power in the current analysis concerns how certain discourses function to marginalise, disavow and delegitimize others (Hall 1997). For example, in Riley, Thompson & Griffin's (2010) analysis the individualised and economic constructions of mushroom use shaped by 'neo-liberal discourse' served to marginalise and render 'unthinkable' collective and radical-political constructions of magic mushroom use advocated by the 'psychedelic discourse' of the 1960s. Foucault (1980) conceptualised a set of discourses operating to establish or maintain a particular version of reality as 'true' as a 'regime of truth'. An example of this is provided by Letcher (2007), who argues that the psychological and biological discourses of the present era of 'scientific materialism' constitute a regime of truth of which

²² Nikolas Rose's (1990) study *Governing the Soul* is often referenced as a renowned example of genealogical analysis in social psychology (Arribas-Ayallon & Walkerdine 2008).

marginalises animistic and supernatural understandings of psychedelic experiences. In the present analysis I explore similar instances of power (as a diffuse and productive force between discourses, Foucault 1980), as well as how certain discourses coalesce to form ‘regimes of truth’. Furthermore, I also explore instances of ‘resistance’ (Foucault 1979), where participants provide constructions which serve to challenge the ‘truth value’ of discourses in the current social, cultural and historical era.

Lastly, my conceptualisation of participants as subjects in analysis is in keeping with a Foucauldian orientation. I do not conceptualise subjects (participants) as rational unitary beings (Venn 1984), but instead as embodied discourse users who construct meaning through social understandings (Blackman 2001), and this has informed my analysis. As Martin & Stenner (2004, pg.399) note within a Foucauldian analysis:

‘participants accounts are communicative constructions, articulated in specific contexts and located within particular discursive formations...attention must turn to the limits and possibilities made available by discourse and how participants operate within these’.

I have attempted this by analysis of the use of discourses in specific data extracts, and by expanding understandings to a broader level through comparison of commonalties and differences of construction between multiple extracts (Wiggins & Riley 2010). Similarly I have analysed how participants negotiate, combine, and attempt to accommodate or ‘bend’ different discourses and discursive boundaries in their construction of meaning (Blackman & Walkerdine 2001, Martin & Stenner 2004).

Analysis of the operation of discourses in talk, with which participants shape their constructions of the meanings of magic mushrooms, is the focus of the following three empirical chapters. The first of which concerns how participants construct meaning of ‘what magic mushrooms do’; how they make sense of the ways in which psilocybin mushrooms ‘alter perceived reality’.

Chapter 5: What Magic Mushrooms Do: ‘Altering Reality’

The most consistent effect of consuming magic mushrooms is that they alter ‘reality’ as it is typically perceived and constructed. Magic mushrooms appear to radically alter a person’s perception (visual, time, and bodily perception), the nature of thought, sense of self, and sense of place, to different degrees depending upon the dose consumed (Hasler et al 2004, Riley & Blackman 2008). Whilst there is a degree of consistency regarding how magic mushrooms appear to ‘alter reality’ (their effects), there is considerable divergence in people’s accounts of how this phenomenon or experience is understood, conceptualised and made meaningful. There is nothing inherent to psilocybin mushrooms which produces these understandings. For example, a neuroscientist and a Mazatec shaman are likely to bring different discourses to bear upon what mushrooms do; the former constituting it in psychopharmacological terms, the latter through animist spirituality (Langlitz 2010). In exploring these divergent conceptions of what magic mushrooms do in participants’ talk I have identified three principal discourses. Firstly, *pharmacological discourse* which represents magic mushrooms as ‘drugs’ and the experiences they occasion (what they do) as a product of the psychoactive chemicals within them. Secondly, *psychological discourse* which constitutes mushrooms as altering a person’s internal reality, affecting the brain and mind, eliciting hallucinations and occasioning experiences informed by previously held beliefs. Thirdly, a radical *parallel-reality discourse* which constructs magic mushrooms as opening gateways to external metaphysical realities, allowing one to perceive alternative dimensions and encounter sentient entities.

Participants also negotiated, synthesised and contrasted these discourses in their accounts. As such, I also explore the relationship between them; how the ‘scientific’ discourses of pharmacology and psychology operate as a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1980) which positions parallel-reality discourse as implausible. Lastly, I shall explore constructions of ‘*celebrated uncertainty*’, which enable participants to represent the ‘reality’ underpinning what mushrooms do in more pragmatic terms. By considering the multiple ways in which participants construct what magic mushrooms do we begin to develop an understanding of what magic mushrooms mean to users.

5.1 Pharmacological Discourse

This discourse enables participants to construct what magic mushrooms do in pharmacological terms; it constitutes mushrooms as occasioning experiences through their effects on biological systems as a result of their action as chemicals or ‘drugs’ (Julien 2004). This can be seen in the extract below where Tim, who has used cultivated and indigenous mushrooms (native to the UK), purchased legally in Europe and illegally at a UK music festival, responds to a question about how mushrooms compare with other substances:

INT: *when you take mushrooms is it like taking other drugs or is it something more significant*

TIM: *it's purely a sort of, I see it in terms of, yeah it's a fun pharmacological experience, yeah nothing sort of, nothing that can't be explained with pharmacology as far as I'm concerned, but yeah it's kind of its quite a weird one in terms of pharmacology because of different things going on, and not really sure what's happening but yeah, it's purely chemical for me*

Pg. 6, 277-283 [Participant 20]

Tim constructs what magic mushrooms do as providing *a fun pharmacological experience*; producing enjoyable effects as a result of their chemical action upon biological systems. His construction of what mushrooms do is both materialist and 'scientific'; by evoking pharmacology and constructing mushroom experiences as *chemical* in nature, he attributes the effects of mushrooms to biological and chemical processes. There is a reductive tone to Tim's account. His repeated use of the word *purely* and representation of mushroom experiences as *nothing that can't be explained* with (or as *nothing more than*) a product of pharmacological action, excludes potential factors other than pharmacology as involved in what mushrooms do. However, by excluding other factors Tim recognises that other 'explanations' of what mushrooms do exist, but he distances himself from them. This is in response to the interviewer's invitation to consider if there is *something more significant* to mushrooms than their action as *drugs*. In responding Tim argues that there isn't, but in doing so he repeatedly locates this pharmacological conception of mushrooms as a personal position (*for me, as far as I am concerned*), recognising that others may see it differently but rejecting alternative explanations. As such, Tim constructs what mushrooms do in pharmacological terms, implicitly classifying them as drugs and the experiences they occasion as biochemical effects.

In the extract above Tim draws on a specialist understanding of pharmacology. Other participants offered less specialist constructions of what mushrooms do, but which still implicitly constitute experiences with mushrooms as a product of their pharmacological action. This was primarily achieved by representing magic mushrooms as 'drugs' and the experiences they occasion as resulting from their effects as drugs. Constructions of what magic mushrooms do and what magic mushrooms are overlap to some extent; by representing mushrooms as drugs, participants also construct what they do as a result of their 'being drugs'. This link between the status of mushrooms as a drug and the experiences they occasion as drug effects operates in the extracts below from Bill, who has used picked indigenous mushrooms. The extracts are part of an exchange about what it was about magic mushrooms that first appealed to him:

BILL: *there was never any sort of grand theory behind it, it wasn't you know, it was an alternative to getting drunk or smoking or, well, usually it was accompanied by a bit of both as well, but you know it was I want to get messy on Friday which one shall I choose (laughs) but yeah it was recreational like drinking is, it's sort of something to do with your mates*

Pg. 5, 266-269

BILL: *it was never sort of connecting with my tribal self or anything (laughs) I can honestly say that amongst any of our friends I don't think any would have said it was really that way, it never, never really came up in that sense, it was just a fun recreational drug among the many to choose from, it was just that this one grew in a field and it was free*

Pg. 6, 277-280 [Participant 2]

Bill implicitly constructs mushroom experiences in pharmacological terms by representing mushrooms as *just a fun recreational drug*; the term *recreational drug* categorises them as one of a number of substances (*among the many to choose from*) which occasion enjoyable experiences (*fun*) via their chemical effects. In a similar construction to Tim above, Bill's use of the word *just* is reductive, representing mushrooms as exclusively 'drugs'. He furthers this representation of mushrooms as drugs by constructing the experiences they occasion as akin to other forms of substance based hedonism; that they enable you to *get messy* (become intoxicated). Getting *messy* is implicitly positioned as a function of the drug's effects, emphasising the mushroom's ability to disrupt the senses. For Bill taking mushrooms is an *alternative* equivalent to other consumptive substance based forms of recreation, such as *getting drunk*, and *smoking* (cannabis).

Bill also represents mushrooms as 'no more than drugs' by stating that using them was *never sort of connecting with my tribal self*. This implies he is aware of alternative uses of mushrooms or understandings of what mushrooms do, but he distances himself from these other possibilities. Instead he constructs availability and absence of cost as the primary reasons why this particular 'drug' was selected for hedonistic purposes (*just that this one grew in a field and it was free*). By constructing magic mushrooms as 'just' (i.e. only and nothing more than) a recreational drug for him and his friends, Bill evokes pharmacology as causal in the occasioning of experiences, although this is not directly stated.

A similar account of mushrooms as exclusively drugs (and therefore pharmacological) can be seen in the extract below from Colin who has used cultivated varieties and picked indigenous

mushrooms. The extract comes from questioning Colin about his disdain for the portrayal of magic mushrooms in PsyTrance (psychedelic-trance) culture²³:

COLIN: *I'd just rather take the drug and apply it to my slightly less airy fairy tastes (.) I don't know, there's like there's a whole naff psychedelic art with mushrooms in it, go to a PsyTrance night there's pictures like that up (.) it's just a particular sort of element, I mean I like various different sorts of dance music, it's just a particular scene that sort of PsyTrance free-party scene is quite big here, and the mushroom seems to be their symbol*

INT: *is it just that it doesn't chime with you or is it making too much of something*

COLIN: *kind of, I think that's sort of it really, making too much of it yeah, exactly that it's just, it's just a drug (.) you wouldn't if you liked your beer you wouldn't go around in like I love beer t-shirts*

INT: *some people do*

COLIN: *yeah some people do but like my lifestyle's beer, I love going out and getting pissed, but the people that do that are generally a bit sad aren't they*

Pg. 10, 525-536 [Participant 4]

Colin rejects the representation of magic mushrooms associated with PsyTrance, with its *naff psychedelic art with mushrooms in it*. The key construction in his account is that mushrooms are *just a drug*; a chemical agent which produces effects. Colin's representation of mushrooms as *just a drug* is in opposition to the PsyTrance representation of mushrooms as more than 'just a drug'; as an object which can be venerated as a *symbol*. As such, he constructs the PsyTrance scene as *making too much of* them. To further illustrate his argument, Colin constructs an analogy between mushrooms and beer; presenting alcohol as a mundane example of a substance typically thought of as 'just a drug'. In doing so he argues that beer is something which should not attract a *lifestyle* (*you wouldn't go around in like I love beer t-shirt*) or be part of someone's identity. He constructs mushrooms and beer as equivalent; representing them as 'just drugs' which you can enjoy (*if you liked your*), but constructs buying into an identity or *lifestyle* around either substance as *generally a bit sad* (as over attached to something which should not be part of one's identity). Colin contends that he would *rather take the drug* and apply it to his *slightly less airy fairy tastes*. This construction positions tastes which are grounded in the mushroom as a *symbol*, rather than as a substance, as outlandish and risible.

²³ PsyTrance is an Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) which embraces the use of psychedelic drugs, psychedelic art, and alternative spirituality within rave and free-party contexts (St John 2009).

To summarise, this discourse enables the construction of mushrooms as ‘just’ drugs; as pharmacologically active substances which provoke experiences through ingestion. This discourse represents a reductive materialist position; it is nothing more than drug intoxication which produces mushroom effects and constructions of what mushrooms do which exceed this are either referred to implicitly and rejected (Tim and Bill’s extracts) or treated contemptuously (Colin’s extract). This discourse constructs what mushrooms do as a product of their action as ‘drugs’.

5.2 Psychological Discourse

Psychological discourse constitutes what magic mushrooms do as interacting with the users’ psychology; their mind, brain, and beliefs. Experiences with mushrooms are represented as ontologically subjective; they exist solely inside the ‘head’ (brain/mind/psyche) of the person taking them. Psychological discourse is comprised of the multiple strands of psychology as an academic discipline and its popular understanding. In the present data set four key strands to this discourse were identified in participants’ talk: *mind & brain*, *neuro-psychedelic*, *hallucinogen* and *orientation & belief*. Whilst different strands of psychological discourse were employed by participants to construct meaning, all share the central construct that what mushrooms do is psychological in nature.

5.2.1 Mind and Brain

The first aspect of psychological discourse prevalent in participant’s talk was the construction that magic mushrooms alter the chemistry of the brain and the working of the mind. An example can be seen in the extract below from Dominic, who has used truffles in Amsterdam:

INT: *so when you take mushrooms is it like other drugs um, like you said about weed sort of affecting your brain chemistry or is it different to that*

DOMINIC: *I (..) yeah, I would say obviously it alters how your brain works for the period of time you are on it, but I also think it’s a bit more (.) I’ll say the word again abstract, it’s a bit more like you think about different things and your perception of everything changes you are not (.) like here it’s very now, I’m like sitting in this room everything’s ordered, obviously the room is a bit messy, but everything is ordered and sort of real*

INT: *yeah*

DOMINIC: *but with mushrooms obviously when your brain is changing the perception of things, like I say not necessarily a room for example, but my body changed like I said I got a very spiritual feeling, I wasn’t myself, so yeah part of it I do think is brain chemistry and*

altering your brain functions, but a lot of it I reckon is a lot more sort of in your mind, mind not just your brain, what makes you tick

Pg. 8, 389-404 [Participant 16]

Dominic establishes a hierarchical dualism between mind and brain. He constructs the ability of magic mushrooms to alter *brain chemistry* and *brain functions* as a biological foundation for experience; as that which occasions the immediate effects of taking mushrooms (*your brain is changing the perception of things*) for the duration of intoxication (*alters how your brain works for the period of time you are on it*). This conception is a development from pharmacological discourse; Dominic positions brain chemical alteration as the psycho-biological mechanism which produces the drugs' physiological effects.

However, he argues that mushrooms also affect your *mind not just your brain* (the word *just* is used reductively to illustrate that the brain merely alters perception). Dominic positions the effect of mushrooms upon the *mind* as that which makes mushroom experiences *a bit more... abstract*; as more unusual than 'just' altering brain function. He represents what mushrooms do in the mind as affecting the sense of self (*I wasn't myself*), thought (*you think about different things*) and as occasioning *a very spiritual feeling*. Dominic therefore constructs the mind as the centre of self and of higher psychological functions (which he represents as *what makes you tick*), in contrast to the brain which occasions immediate perceptual effects. Furthermore, he constructs other drugs (such as *weed* suggested by the interviewer) as merely affecting the brain (changing immediate perception) whereas the experiences mushrooms occasion are represented as *a lot more sort of in your mind*; affecting the sense of self and personhood. Whilst Dominic constructs brain and mind as serving different functions, both are represented as responsible for the nature of the experiences that mushrooms can occasion: a dualistic interaction couched in psychological discourse.

Dominic's account explicitly references the central tenet of psychological discourse by constructing the brain and mind as the originators of experiences: taking magic mushrooms has an effect upon these psychological structures and what is experienced stems from them rather than from the mushrooms. Other participants built upon this psychological conception of what mushrooms do; elaborating how mushrooms affect the brain and the mind. One such conception can be seen below, in which mushrooms are constructed as providing access to ways of thinking and experiencing that are usually inaccessible.

5.2.2 Neuro-Psychedelic Discourse

Psychedelic discourse constructs magic mushrooms as 'mind-manifesting' (Stafford 1992): as expanding consciousness and providing access to hidden capacities of the mind. More recently this discourse has been taken up by psychopharmacology and has been given a materialist edge; rather

than constructing psychedelics as having an effect upon the mind the emphasis has shifted to the brain as the location of psychedelic action (hence the term ‘neuro-psychedelic’, Langlitz 2012). This construction is evident in the extract below from Wendy, who has used both picked indigenous and purchased cultivated mushrooms. This account follows her representation of a ‘bad trip’ as one of her most memorable experiences with mushrooms:

WENDY: *strangely I have some kind of fond nostalgia about it (laughs) even though it was fucking horrible*

INT: *is that cause of what you went through, or more because of how unique an experience it was*

WENDY: *um, it was more uh, just this sense of like there is this whole other side to your brain that you can only access in that state (laughs) it’s just like, it’s a whole other way of thinking and experiencing (.) and it’s just this sense of it’s wonderful that my brain can do that*

INT: *even if it’s bad*

WENDY: *yeah, yeah even if it’s bad it’s still just this, I don’t even know how to put it into words but like, I don’t know it’s a wonderful thing even when it’s horrendous like, I suppose it’s a bit hippyish but I suppose it’s like, we don’t know what our brains are capable of and when you start messing about with drugs and psychedelics, um like (.) I don’t know you just do get a bit closer to it (laughs) it’s an altered state of thinking which I’ve never experienced in a different capacity*

Pg. 5, 198-213 [Participant 15]

Wendy constructs what mushrooms do in psychedelic terms²⁴; representing them as occasioning an *altered state* of consciousness which enables a *whole other way of thinking and experiencing* (in contrast to normal waking consciousness). She constructs this other way of thinking and experiencing as emanating from a typically inaccessible *whole other side* of the *brain*; a side she represents as possessing surprising capabilities (*it’s wonderful that my brain can do that*). Wendy constructs *drugs and psychedelics* (including mushrooms) as tools which enable users to *access* this typically hidden side of the brain; whilst they do not generate experiences in and of themselves, they are represented as the *only* means by which we *get closer* to the brains’ normally unknown capabilities. However, Wendy adds the disclaimer that suggesting the brain has hidden capabilities is *a bit hippyish*; inoculating against a possible accusation that this is an outlandish

²⁴ Wendy’s account also demonstrates other features of psychedelic discourses: her construction of mushroom trips as wondrous and horrific (*it’s a wonderful thing even when it’s horrendous*) has parallels with Huxley’s (1956) ‘heaven and hell’ metaphor of psychedelic experience.

construction of human potential or a New Age cliché (this disclaimer may be a result of the interviewer's presumed position as a 'psychology student').

By locating this hidden and inaccessible realm of experience in the brain Wendy is drawing upon neuro-psychedelic discourse; representing magic mushrooms as 'brain-manifesting' (rather than 'mind-manifesting') agents which occasion states that reveal the hidden capabilities of the brain. In contrast to Dominic's account above, Wendy makes no distinction between mind and brain as serving different functions; she roots her account in the neuropsychological to construct all of what mushrooms do.

Having explored a construction of the brain as central to what mushrooms do, I now wish to return to constructions of mushrooms' effects upon the mind in psychological discourse; as occasioning experiences which come from the contents of a person's mind.

5.2.3 Mushrooms as Hallucinogens

This aspect of psychological discourse enabled participants to construct mushrooms as 'hallucinogens': producing artificial or illusory experiences which occur inside, or are a product of, the mind. The two extracts below are from Andrea who has used purchased cultivated mushrooms and truffles. She is providing accounts of typical experiences she had with mushrooms in social environments:

***ANDREA** we were usually doing it in somebody's house, or in somebody's back garden the hallucinations were mostly taken on by surrounding objects and things like that*

***INT:** OK*

***ANDREA:** at least for me anyway rather than (.) they were more that kind of movement hallucination or things changing around me, rather than me seeing things that I was necessarily pulling out of my mind*

Pg. 4, 181-187

***ANDREA:** again there was the discussion of the hallucinations, and at that point in time there was probably more of the imagining things out of your head hallucinations, than the situational alterations in perception that sort of thing*

Pg. 5, 211-214 [Telephone] [Participant 14]

Psychological discourse can be seen to operate in Andrea's accounts via repeated use of the word *hallucination*, a term which constructs experiences as illusory psychological phenomena. Andrea draws on a distinction between two types of hallucination made possible by mushrooms: those which involve *situational alterations in perception* to objects which exist, and those which involve

seeing things which do not exist. She constructs this second class of hallucinations as psychological projections; as existing within the *mind* or *head* of an individual, or as *pulled* or *imagined* out of this interior as a result of taking mushrooms. This constructs the ontology of what is seen and experienced when on mushrooms as a product of the mushroom users' psychology; it is not 'real' beyond an individuals' subjective experience of it, as it is a hallucination which occurs solely within their mind.

Andrea's account constructs the contents of an individual's mind as informing the kind of experiences they have: what mushrooms do is constructed as *pulling* things from the imagination or the mind and projecting them as hallucinations. Hallucinations were represented as disturbances to visual perception and are only one type of experience participants' constructed magic mushrooms as occasioning. Other participants constructed the contents of the mind as informing other aspects of mushroom experiences.

5.2.4 Orientation and Belief

Participants constructed the previously held beliefs and psychological orientation (what is 'on the mind') of the person ingesting mushrooms as affecting what mushrooms do. This represents the contents of an individual's mind as shaping their experiences with magic mushrooms. The following extract is from Karl who has used purchased cultivated truffles (psilocybin containing sclerotia of cultivated mushrooms) in the Netherlands. He is responding to a question about his account of a spiritual experience occasioned by mushrooms:

INT: *did you still feel that the experience was particularly profound or valuable*

KARL: *yeah most definitely, it was, I mean again I think (.) I'm not sure that mushrooms are responsible for certain thoughts, but rather they liberate your mind to access thoughts that perhaps were slightly more uh, so if you were a believer or having doubts about whether there is a God or not for example, taking mushrooms I'm sure would turn it into a religious experience, I'm pretty sure about that, equally if you are someone who is troubled or have issues at home or whatever mushrooms would just amplify that*

Pg. 6-7, 290-298 [Participant 22]

Karl constructs what mushrooms do as *liberat[ing] your mind to access thoughts* that are typically inaccessible. This construction has similarities with neuro-psychedelic discourse, but Karl constructs mushrooms as providing access to the *mind* rather than the brain. What these constructions share is the attribution of what mushrooms do to their effects on psychological function; Karl explicitly states he does not think *that mushrooms are responsible for certain thoughts*; they don't generate them, but instead provide *access* to existing thoughts.

Karl represents thoughts which are typically ‘in the back of one’s mind’ as those which mushrooms make accessible. He illustrates this with an example of religion; asserting that if one were having a crisis of faith or was a firm believer, this spiritual orientation and belief when *taking mushrooms ...would turn it into a religious experience*. His provision of a further example of different thoughts (personal difficulty- *if you are someone who is troubled*) serves to illustrate that it is the user’s beliefs and orientation (what is ‘on their mind’) which shape the nature of experiences when taking magic mushrooms, rather than the mushrooms themselves. As such, Karl builds this argument to construct what mushrooms do as *just amplify[ing]* what is in a person’s mind: as generating experiences which are furnished by an individual’s psychology.

The extract above emphasises the user’s more immediate state of mind, a psychological construction which I have labelled their ‘orientation’. Participants also constructed established and previously held beliefs as shaping magic mushroom experiences. The following extract is from Alan, who has used cultivated and indigenous mushrooms. This is part of an argument he made that objective research with ‘entheogens’²⁵ has been rendered problematic by the published works of psychedelic authors:

ALAN: a problem with anything to do with academic work on anything entheogenic is the dreaded Castaneda effect, he’s muddied the water for everybody for a long time

INT: do you mean the knock on effect of what’s out there in public understanding

ALAN: yeah, it’s the whole sort of, belief created world thing, if you believe something, if you believe in fairies you are much more likely to see them than someone who doesn’t, um, I know people that read Castaneda as fact and have similar or related really impressive mystical experiences, and they don’t care that it’s probably not true because it’s been a catalyst or a stimulus for them to believe that such things are possible

Pg. 14, 718-725 [Participant 1]

Alan constructs the notion of a *belief created world* representing ‘beliefs’ (a part of someone’s psychological makeup) as generative of how people experience alterations to reality. He asserts that the likelihood of experiencing something is increased by belief in its possibility, illustrating this with the example that *if you believe in fairies you are much more likely to see them than someone who doesn’t*. Alan uses this construction of beliefs as generative of experiences to illustrate the *dreaded Castaneda effect*; Carlos Castaneda was a New Age writer of popular anthropology whose accounts of shamanistic apprenticeship and mystical drug experiences were subsequently exposed as fraudulent (Hardman 2007). However, his works continue to be republished since their initial

²⁵ ‘Entheogen’ is term of classification for a range of plant based psychedelics, constituting them as religious sacraments that occasion spiritual experiences (Letcher 2007).

release in the late 1960s (Penguin reissued Castaneda's works in 2004) and his works remain influential (Letcher 2006, See Chapter 2 Literature Review this thesis).

Alan represents Castaneda's writings as creating new ways of experiencing entheogens that are based on fiction; he proposes that *people that read Castaneda as fact* have *similar or related impressive mystical experiences* to those the writer details. Alan implies that had they not read Castaneda their experiences may have been different. As such, he constructs belief as enabling and underpinning experience: that it is necessary *for [people] to believe that such things are possible* in order to experience them. Alan constructs what mushrooms do in similar terms to Karl implying that they occasion experiences in a relatively neutral way; something happens when people consume mushrooms but the contents and nature of the experiences someone has are constructed as being shaped by the beliefs of the person consuming them.

Psychological discourse constitutes experiences with mushrooms as psychological in origin, as products of the mind and brain, as hallucinations, as psychedelic experiences, and as emanating from the beliefs and thoughts of the individual consuming them. In contrast to pharmacological discourse which attributes experience to the action of the substance, this discourse attributes experiences to the contents or function of psychology, positioning magic mushrooms as necessary to make these experiences possible through their ingestion, but not as causing them. I shall now explore constructions which go beyond the materialism of pharmacology and psychology and which represent what mushrooms do as providing access to 'parallel-realities'.

5.3 Parallel-Reality Discourse

Parallel-reality discourse allows magic mushroom users to construct psilocybin mushrooms as enabling perception of, or journeying in, co-existing metaphysical realms which are populated by entities. This is a departure from the previous discourse which constructs mushrooms as affecting a person's 'internal' reality; their subjective experience via the function of the mind or brain. Instead parallel-reality discourse constitutes what mushrooms do as affecting the perception of 'external' reality; as making worlds and beings that occupy other dimensions visible and accessible. As such, this discourse enables participants to construct parallel dimensions and entities as 'real': as existing externally and autonomously to them.

5.3.1 Breaking the Veil

The first feature of this discourse is the notion that psychedelics enable the user to 'break the veil'; to disintegrate a perceptual barrier between realities and to observe parallel worlds that are usually not accessible to human perception. This construction can be seen in the extract below, which follows an account Will gave of a visual experience he has had whilst tripping with high doses of

picked indigenous mushrooms (and on separate occasions when using LSD). The experience is one of a piece of quartz crystal he owns pulsing and radiating light:

WILL: *it probably is actually doing that on another dimension like*

INT: *but do you need psychedelics to see it*

WILL: *they just break down that barrier, the veil as they call it*

INT: *OK*

WILL: *that's what I reckon, so the things you see are actually there (.) it's just you're seeing through a veil of something the uh, veil's broken down, it's more dimensional especially on mushrooms*

Pg. 2, 94 -100 [Participant 13]

Will constructs reality as *dimensional* and represents what he sees when on psychedelics as always happening in *another dimension*; terms typically associated with science-fiction and esoteric religions which is often taken to mean parallel realities (Hume 2007). He constructs these realities as separated by a *barrier* which he elaborates through an esoteric/psychedelic metaphor of *the veil*. His construction that this is *as they call it* positions an unspecified *they* as the creators of this metaphor and represents it as currently in use. The metaphor of *the veil* constructs the barrier between dimensions as primarily visual and semi-permeable, as concealing or hiding other realities from perception. Will constructs psychedelics as able to *break down the veil*; representing mushrooms *especially* (and also LSD) as overriding the default of ordinary conscious perception which is typically 'veiled'. His repeated references to sight (*things you see ...you're seeing through*) reinforce the construction that psychedelics enable the visual perception of other dimensions once the *veil* is broken. Will represents the *things you see* once the veil has been *broken down* as possessing an external existence; that they *are actually there* constructs them as real (*actually*- meaning in existence) and occupying an external dimensional space (*there*). To further elaborate the construction that parallel dimensions are real, here is an additional extract from Will, which follows an account he gave of his most 'trippy' experience with mushrooms:

WILL: *yeah that is pretty much the only time I've actually full on tripped, but every time I've taken them I've always had this sense of like much more connected to nature uh, much more likely to see fairies and imps and shit like that running around in the woods if I was there*

INT: *really*

WILL: *I reckon yeah, cause again its dimensional isn't it, cause like if the universe is infinite then everything can exist (.) you know even fairies and goblins and trolls and, you know they're not necessarily here but they're there you know just on a, slightly different um, spectrum is that the right word*

INT: *yeah I know what you mean like wavelength or something*

WILL: *yeah, yeah our eyes can only see a certain spectrum of light um, but there's tens of thousands of other spectrums, I'm not sure I'm saying it right not the most scientific of people*

Pg. 4 164-174 [Participant 13]

Will furthers his construction that the *universe* is *dimensional* through an analogy with light *spectrums*; he likens the presence of parallel yet imperceptible dimensions of reality, to the presence of parallel yet imperceptible frequencies of light (e.g. infrared). By equating the physical properties of light (its spectrum) with a lay interpretation of the dimensional universe (or multi-universe) (Gribbin 2010), Will is using scientific discourse to add plausibility to his argument that what we ordinarily perceive is just part of a broader physical reality. In doing so, he implicitly constructs magic mushrooms as a means by which these *tens of thousands of other spectrums* of reality may be perceived.

Will's conception of parallel realities is used to justify his argument that entities (*fairies and imps*) encountered when taking mushrooms exist. He constructs these entities as *not necessarily here* in our reality but as *on a slightly different spectrum*. The spatial terms (*not... here, they're there*) represent entities as existing externally, implying they occupy space and are therefore 'real' (although Will does not clarify if this is a physical or metaphysical space). Will attempts to add further authority to his construction that parallel realities and entities are 'real' by using the axiom that *if the universe is infinite then everything can exist*: this draws upon an interpretation of scientific discourses of probability in order to make his construction more plausible. However, he adds the disclaimer that he is *not the most scientific of people*, inoculating him against judgement in the research encounter if he is in some way incorrect.

As well as attempting to legitimise the existence of parallel-realities, the above extract also introduces another aspect of the discourse: that parallel realities are populated by entities. Will constructs entities as folkloric creatures (*fairies and goblins and trolls*) and associates the possibility of encountering them with being in a natural environment (*in the woods*). The implication of his construction is that what mushrooms do is make these entities and the realms they occupy perceptible (by breaking the veil) and that these places and beings are externally 'real'. Other participants also constructed entities as existing independently beyond the veil.

5.3.2 Entities: Things Beyond the Veil

Several other participants offered accounts of perceiving entities of various different types when taking mushrooms, and constructed them as 'real'. This can be seen in the extract below from Olivia, who has used exotic varieties of psilocybin mushrooms indigenous to Mesoamerica. The extract follows a comment she made about trees appearing more alive when using magic mushrooms:

OLIVIA: *I think I, well I saw (laughs) more than the trees having personalities, it's more like they are built of different personalities different beings like, you know this idea of fairies or gnomes or spirits of nature (.) I know not everybody is able to see them, but I was able to see them to experience them*

INT: *wow really*

OLIVIA: *not as they're painted, not as a little girl with wings not that sort of thing, or a tiny man with a hat, not not that*

INT: *OK so not your typical fairy-tale creatures*

OLIVIA: *yeah exactly, but they are creatures, I have never been able to fully describe them really, but I know they are there and who they are, and I know that at some point I was interacting with them and them with me like, some sort of silent communication, but it all comes to a sense of respect, of knowing they're there and saying like, I acknowledge you are who you are, I don't know (..) you realise they are very powerful, and I wasn't afraid of them but I knew they were part of something different, another reality or another space you know (laughs) but they are always there watching observing creating*

INT: *and mushrooms allow you to see this*

OLIVIA: *yeah, but not just the mushroom, I think you can experience them through different substances as well, through meditation um, if you manage to reach a really high level of meditation like, you can actually sync with these other realities*

Pg. 6, 287-305 [Participant 11]

Olivia constructs seeing entities whilst using mushrooms as an encounter with *beings* that exist independently of her. She draws upon discourses of animism and fairy-mythology (Letcher 2001) to represent them as folkloric *creatures*; as *fairies or gnomes or spirits of nature*. She constructs these creatures as similar to the *idea* of folkloric entities, but adds that they are not as fairy-tale beings are typically depicted (*not as they're painted*). Olivia further draws upon animism and folklore by constructing these entities as magical; she represents them as *very powerful*, as deserving of *respect* and as *watching observing creating* in either their reality or our own. These are attributes typically associated with nature spirits or fairies in indigenous animism, European folklore and in modern reinterpretations of these beliefs (Greenwood 2005).

Olivia constructs these beings as ‘real’. By asserting that she communicated with them (*I was interacting with them and them with me like, some sort of silent communication*) she constructs herself and the entities as separate: representing entities as ‘things’ which she can interact with. She further constructs the creatures as existing independently via a spatial metaphor: representing them as existing in *another reality or another space* which is *different* to the one that we occupy (a similar construction to Will above). Olivia’s use of parallel-reality discourse attempts to explain why these beings are typically imperceptible. She constructs them as *always there*, but as requiring psychedelics (*not just the mushroom...different substances as well*) and spiritual techniques such as *a really high level of meditation* in order to *sync with these other realities* and perceive them.

Despite constructing these entities as ‘real’, Olivia adds the caveat that the experience of seeing them is unusual (*not everybody is able to see them*) and personal (*but I was able to see them*). This proposes that individual factors beyond magic mushroom consumption are needed to *see them*. It is also an attempt to account for why this is not a ubiquitous experience. As such, Olivia constructs what mushrooms do as potentially facilitating perception of hidden realms and entities, for those fortunate enough to see them.

Both Olivia and Will construct the entities perceived as a result of consuming magic mushrooms as folkloric creatures. Other participants represented them in similar but different ways whilst still constructing them as real. In the extract below Alan, who has used cultivated and indigenous mushrooms, is providing an account of his multiple experiences of encountering entities when using psychedelics:

ALAN: I’ve had that a number of times, um the mushroom thing you tend to get almost the traditional pixie imagery um, sort of pointed hats and little green people (.) the similar sort of experience on other drugs tends to be a lot more angular um more machine elf, and it is almost like looking through different prescription eye glasses spectacles at the same thing, I suspect that none of us are seeing it as it is um but it’s something similar out there

Pg.12, 660-664 [Participant 1]

Alan constructs his experiences of encountering entities on mushrooms as involving *traditional pixie imagery*; a folkloric representation similar to that offered by the participants above. However, he constructs this as just one perception of something with an external existence which he has encountered in altered states of consciousness. Alan constructs the perception of psychedelic entities as changeable; *pixie imagery* on mushrooms, *more angular um more machine elf*²⁶ on

²⁶ ‘Machine Elf’ was a term used by McKenna (1991) to describe the humanoid dwarf-like entities comprised of fractal patterns he encountered when using large doses of psychedelics (especially magic mushrooms).

other drugs, but he asserts that he is looking *at the same thing* in all cases. This serves to construct entities as possessing a transcendent existence, regardless of how they appear. This is further reinforced by his statement that *it's located out there* (existing externally) and his argument that others in altered states are collectively experiencing variants of the same thing (*none of us are seeing it as it is*). Alan represents different drugs as *different prescription eye glasses spectacles*; constructing them as different lenses which alter the appearance of something with an underlying existence.

The above extracts construct the entities perceived whilst using magic mushrooms as externally real and as existing 'out there' in a parallel reality. Some participants represented taking magic mushrooms as part of a deliberate attempt to reach or perceive other realities, constructing it as a quest.

5.3.3 Questing

In the extract below Frank, who has used cultivated and indigenous mushrooms, is concluding an account of his experience with a large dose of purchased truffles (the psilocybin rich sclerotia of certain strains of *Psilocybe* mushroom, Pellegrini et al 2013). He recounts taking truffles whilst engaging in sensory deprivation (wearing a sleep mask and ear plugs) with the specific intention of trying to leave his body:

FRANK: *later on that day after I'd sort of come down, I was really thinking about what happened, that was quite silly or dark or, I remember like the guy that said to me you are only half in here, I was I was there sort of, but I was quite aware that I could feel my body lying on my bed (.) and yeah because, I don't know if you've read anything about shamanism*

INT: *yeah bits and pieces*

FRANK: *sort of journeying into the spirit world, and they have an upper world and an underworld and I remember reading that a while ago and thinking oh, something I'd quite like to do (laughs) and the time before I felt like I was going down to the underworld and then sort of bottled it, I was going no I shouldn't I don't understand this I'm not like a shaman that has been training for years and years to deal with that sort of thing, but then it just sort of happened by accident that time*

Pg. 5, 204-217 [Participant 23]

The term has since been applied generally to entities perceived when consuming mushrooms or DMT (Luke 2011).

Frank constructs parallel-reality as metaphysical, as a *spirit world* (the word *spirit* implying it is not physical, *world* as separate and contained). This construction is drawn from his understanding of *shamanism*; the shamanistic divinatory practices of astral projection and *journeying into* other realities (*an upper world and an underworld*). These realities are constructed as ‘real’ by Frank through spatial terminology, that you can *journey into* or be present in them (*I was there*), but not as physical; that he was only *half in here* and still aware of his physical body adds to the construction of shamanic journeying to metaphysical realms.

Frank constructs his experiences as a quest; as something he wanted to do based upon his *reading* of shamanism, and which he deliberately attempted (*I felt like I was going down to the underworld and then sort of bottled it*) although he constructs his most recent experience as having *happened by accident*. Frank constructs this potential accessing of other worlds as potentially frightening or dangerous; constructing trepidation that he is not suitably equipped or experienced to enter other realities (*no I shouldn't I don't understand this I'm not like a shaman*). This sense of danger adds to the construction of the actuality of a parallel-reality, as a place where you could potentially come to some sort of harm if you have not been *training for years and years to deal with that sort of thing*. It also constructs expertise as necessary to quest with mushrooms safely.

In summary, parallel-reality discourse enables the construction of other worlds as ‘real’: as other dimensions, metaphysical spaces, or worlds beyond the reality we occupy. The entities which dwell in these other realities are also constructed as real, as existing independently of the person perceiving them. In using this discourse participants drew upon animist and folkloric conceptions of entities and a shamanic understanding that what mushrooms do is enable one to journey to these hidden and usually inaccessible realms.

5.4 The Relationship Between the Discourses of ‘Reality’

Psychological and pharmacological discourses both represent a ‘scientific’ conception of what magic mushrooms do; they constitute mushrooms as biologically and psychologically active substances. In contrast parallel-reality discourse is an esoteric conception of what mushrooms do; constituting mushrooms as making perceptible other worlds and creatures which are constructed as ‘real’. Parallel-reality discourse is at odds with the contemporary materialist regime of truth, which asserts that mushrooms are ‘drugs’ or psychologically active agents and that mushroom-induced visions of other worlds and entities are illusory products of the brain and mind (Letcher 2007). This operated in participant’s talk implicitly as those who drew on both pharmacological and psychological discourses distanced themselves from ‘other’ explanations of what mushrooms do; offering an unspoken rejection of explanations associated with parallel-reality discourse. Psychological and pharmacological discourses (or a ‘psycho-pharmacological’ synthesis of the

two) operated as a regime of truth both implicitly and explicitly in participants' accounts of what mushrooms do, particularly where the different discourses were employed simultaneously. Firstly, I shall explore the explicit rejection of parallel-reality discourse by some participants.

5.4.1 Rejection of Parallel-Reality Discourse:

Some participants rejected the discourse of parallel-reality outright, constructing it as implausible or irrational. In doing so they constructed psychological and pharmacological discourses as a 'true' and 'scientific' account of what mushrooms do. This is exemplified in the extract below from Alice, who has used picked indigenous mushrooms. This exchange was prompted by Alice commenting that an acquaintance of hers has reported encounters with folkloric entities when using magic mushrooms:

*ALICE: they must always be here only I can't see them unless I'm on mushrooms
(laughs) like err*

INT: some people do believe that

ALICE: that's just ridiculous, I mean if I take a psychedelic drug that makes me hallucinate, ignore that bit, then suddenly I can see little creatures that are always here, but can only be seen if you take this magic thing provided by nature, no come on how ludicrous is that like, how ludicrous is that, you study scientifically you study the effects of psilocybin on the brain and it obviously, it gives you visuals like, it changes the way your brain interprets things significance, that's, therefore you're going to see things that aren't there, so how you could ever think that some somehow there are little creatures that are just waiting for you to take a mushroom, so it can go hello we're always here looking after you, playing mischievous little tricks but you can only see us when you take mushrooms, I'd be disturbed if I started to believe that

Pg. 19, 1001-1012 [Participant 3]

Alice draws upon the tenets of parallel-reality discourse (that *creatures* exist in another reality *but can only be seen if ... you take mushrooms*) in order to emphatically disavow it. She strongly rejects this discourse by representing the construction that entities are real as implausible: as *ridiculous, ludicrous* and by expressing incredulity that anyone could endorse it (*how you could ever think that... I'd be disturbed if I started to believe that*) implying that this belief is 'mad'. She represents mushrooms as a *psychedelic drug that makes me hallucinate* and positions a psychological explanation that entities are a product of this hallucinatory action as more plausible. Alice constructs *creatures* as mushroom induced hallucinations by representing the experience of encountering them as one of seeing *things that aren't there* (things which do not exist in external reality).

Alice constructs *the effects of psilocybin on the brain* as the mechanism which underpins hallucinatory experiences; stating that mushrooms give *you visuals* and alters *the way your brain interprets the significance of things*. This neuropsychological construction (combining elements of psychological and pharmacological discourses) is used to argue that seeing entities is a by-product of the effects of the psychoactive chemical (psilocybin) in magic mushrooms upon the user's brain. She deploys this psychological construction to undermine parallel-reality discourse, constructing it as a 'scientific' (*you study scientifically the effects*) and true account of what mushrooms do.

Alice's extract is a firm rejection of parallel-reality discourse, an emphatic argument that it is a ridiculous thing to believe in. Although less emphatic, other participants also rejected parallel reality discourse as irrational and implausible. In the extract below Andrea, who has used purchased cultivated mushrooms and truffles, is responding to a question about whether she believes it is possible to see entities when consuming mushrooms:

ANDREA: *possibly it's my logical rational mind, but I mean I know for a fact that things I see are not hidden shadows being brought into light, purely by, you know, they're not some magic potion you've taken and are able to see things that are hidden from everybody else, and that when it wears away they hide, they go back into the darkness again, it is literally things that you conjure out of your brain or are suggested to you in the environment in my opinion*

INT: OK

ANDREA: *there may be people who, for all I know people could actually see things that are really there, they don't see them unless they take mushrooms, I'm totally open to the idea that that happens, I just do not believe that that is, at least for me and the people I have taken mushrooms with (.) I don't believe that, I think basically that they hallucinate and conjure up things in their mind, and project them and (.) can also suggest to other people who are then, often you know, involved in a sort of collective hallucination but it's not little people no (laughs)*

Pg.10-11, 493-511 [Telephone] [Participant 14]

Andrea rejects the tenets of parallel reality discourse by asserting that mushrooms are *not some magic potion* which reveal *things that are hidden from everybody else* (in the darkness of an imperceptible other reality), and by stating that entities are *not little people* ('little people' is a colloquialism for folkloric entities or fairies which implies that they are 'real' beings). Having rejected parallel-reality discourse Andrea positions psychological discourse as a more 'believable' explanation of what mushrooms do. She constructs the perception of entities as hallucinations which emanate from the users' mind (*they hallucinate and conjure up things in their mind*) brain (*it is literally things that you conjure out of your brain*) or group social context (*a sort of collective*

hallucination). Andrea draws upon the authority of reason to endorse this psychological explanation arguing that her *logical rational mind* prevents her from believing in the reality of entities, implying that a belief in entities is irrational. Andrea constructs psychological discourse as a more rational account of reality by her firm assertion that she *know[s] for a fact that things* she sees are not externally ‘real’; a construction which rejects parallel-reality discourse, and which positions psychological discourse as ‘factual’ and true.

However, Andrea does not construct this as an absolute statement, instead representing her preference for a psychological explanation as personal (*at least for me/in my opinion*). She also attempts to construct a disclaimer that she is *totally open to the idea* that some people may perceive ‘real’ mushroom entities, but subsequently rejects this as something she just cannot believe (*I don’t believe that*).

Both Andrea and Alice reject parallel-reality discourse as implausible and construct those who believe in it as mistaken. Psychological discourse is positioned as more plausible through appeals to the authority of rationality and science. In both accounts there is an unstated sense that psychological explanations of entity encounters are ‘true’, and this represents a power differential between the discourses. The operation of psychological discourses as part of a contemporary regime of truth means that they are taken to represent a factual or ‘true’ (constructed as accurately representing reality) account of what mushrooms do. In contrast parallel-reality discourse is dismissed as merely a ‘belief’ which is open to ridicule as it is contrary to the ‘truth’ established by the other scientific discourses.

In spite of this, other participants did not reject parallel-reality discourse as unbelievable and ‘untrue’, and instead they attempted to accommodate it into the ‘truth’ provided by psychological and pharmacological discourses. As such, participants attempted to construct entities and other worlds as externally ‘real’, whilst also accepting the tenets of psychological and pharmacological conceptions of what mushrooms do.

5.4.2 (Attempted) Accommodation

Whilst some participants constructed parallel-reality discourse as wholly implausible, others attempted to accommodate it within the scientific materialist constructions of reality expressed in ‘psycho-pharmacological’ discourse. One attempt to do this can be seen in the extract below from Alan, who has used indigenous and cultivated mushrooms, and is part of a lengthy construction he offered of encountering entities when using psychedelics:

ALAN: there's something out there, or in somewhere that is not the same as what we perceive to be humans, and there are, one of the telling things is there are other ways to access that mind state um, (.) really really involved yoga and breathing exercises can get you into similar places, which, you know the reductive thing is it's a brain chemistry change um, but it might be that the brain chemistry change is what focuses the perception on something that is out there uh, there's no actual way to answer that because you can't, it's the observer thing so just go with what it seems to be, convenient metaphor is there is this machine elf

Pg. 12, 647-652 [Participant 1]

Alan attempts to accommodate the differing explanations of the reality behind entity encounters with mushrooms, enabled by both parallel-reality and psychological discourses. He utilises parallel-reality discourse to construct entities as occupying an alternate dimension (*there's something out there or in somewhere that is not the same as what we perceive to be humans*). He then draws upon psychological discourse to position a *mind state* (brought about by mushrooms and other activities like yoga) as the means by which you can gain access to *similar places* or other realities.

By drawing upon psychological discourse Alan needs to address the potentially undermining construction that experiences can be reduced to a *brain chemistry change* which constitutes entities as hallucinatory epiphenomena induced by psychopharmacology. To accommodate the two discourses Alan dispenses with the *reductive* construction that brain chemical change manifests entities as hallucinations. Instead he constructs the brain as a 'lens' which *focuses the perception on something that is out there*. This is a shift in ontological attribution: altering the chemistry of the brain is constructed as the material mechanism which makes perceiving entities possible. Alan's attempt to accommodate both discourses retains the psychological materialist conception of what mushrooms do (they alter brain chemistry), but constructs this as the mechanism by which parallel-reality may be perceived. However, he offers this construction tentatively (qualifying that *it might be* functioning this way) and argues that ultimately determining the truth of either construction of what mushrooms do is impossible. As such, he advocates pragmatism (*so just go with what it seems to be*).

The above extract is an active construction of accommodation: Alan is attempting to combine discourses to create a space for parallel-reality within the dominance of the 'psycho-pharmacological'. This illustrates the power of 'psycho-pharmacological' discourses: if it is engaged with, the materialist construction that mushrooms alter the function of the brain has to be accounted for, due to its status as scientific 'truth'. A similar construction can be seen in extract below from Simon who has used both picked and cultivated mushrooms:

INT: so are psychedelics you mentioned DMT and mushrooms, a means of making contact with spirits, do they sort of cause that conversation

SIMON: well I don't know, interaction between my nervous system and tryptamine hallucinogens does seem to make that type of awareness of spirits very very likely, much more so with mushrooms and DMT than with Acid for instance um (.) so even though Acid is a fairly close relative chemically speaking and subjectively speaking, but uh yeah there's something about mushrooms and DMT that is far more magical in its nature, it's a much more outward facing state of altered consciousness

Pg. 7, 360-366 [Participant 6]

Simon positions the psychopharmacological action of psychedelics (*interaction between my nervous system and tryptamine hallucinogens*), as the mechanism by which *awareness of spirits* is made possible. 'Spirits' was a term Simon used throughout the interview to denote metaphysical entities (informed by his involvement with contemporary occultism). His use of the word *awareness* suggests that spirits exist externally, as it is something attention is drawn to. This construction allows for accommodation similar to that undertaken by Alan above; Simon repositions the psychopharmacological action of a class of psychedelics as enabling *awareness* of something external (parallel-reality). This combination of discourses can also be seen in his construction that mushrooms occasion an *outward facing state of altered consciousness*; representing a psychological state (*altered consciousness*) as enabling perception of things which are external to him (*outward facing* suggests its perception of things in the world, rather than inward facing which would be things in the mind).

Having represented psychedelic pharmacology as enabling an awareness of spirits Simon then qualifies this as a particular property of mushrooms and DMT. He constructs other *chemically* (pharmacological) and *subjectively* (psychological) similar substances (*Acid*; LSD) as not occasioning this awareness. As such, he positions an unspecified *something about* mushrooms and DMT which enables this property of awareness of spirits, which is beyond their pharmacological action. He furthers this construction by representing mushrooms and DMT as being more *magical in [their] nature*, implying that there is a supernatural element to them as substances.

In both extracts the psychobiological actions of mushrooms upon the brain and nervous system operate as a 'truth' which must be incorporated into a parallel-reality construction of what mushrooms do. Pharmacological and psychological discourses cannot therefore be dismissed as 'beliefs' or side-lined (if these discourses are engaged with, other participants merely utilised parallel-reality discourse) because of their 'truth value'; their status as scientific discourse renders them immune to dismissal in the above accounts. As such, Alan and Simon attempt to avoid the reductionism of psychopharmacological 'truth' by recasting biological and psychological action as

enabling perception of things which exist, rather than as generating illusory experiences. However, by attempting to accommodate the discourses these extracts also introduce the issue of uncertainty as to what is 'true', something other participants also mobilised.

5.4.3 The Value of Uncertainty

In the extract below Karl, who has used truffles purchased in the Netherlands, is reflecting upon his experience of seeing entities (*imps*) when using mushrooms:

KARL: (.) *the truth is I'm not entirely sure, maybe these imps are actually true and maybe you just need mushrooms to get outside of our little world and feel you can play with them, I don't know, but from a sanity perspective I think it's more, I'd say it's more reasonable to believe that mushrooms are doing something to you which isn't normal, and that might not be true, but it's very, I think it's a brave step to go the other way and say that is reality and this isn't (.) and I can see how it could happen quite easily but (.) yeah, I, my view is that it's something that you could always do, you could always later on in life decide actually, it's the imps that are true that's real, but in the meantime it's you know, I'm going to choose not to believe in them*

Pg. 15-16, 744-752 [Participant 22]

Karl represents himself as uncertain about what mushrooms do. He constructs it as possible that parallel-reality discourse represents a *true* account of his experiences; that *imps are actually true* and that you *just need mushrooms to get outside of our little world* and engage with them. However, Karl expresses trepidation around endorsing this construction, representing it as *a brave step* to adopt the understanding that entities are real. This is because it challenges the consensus experience of material reality; he constructs it as going *the other way* (accepting a position counter to our usual understanding) and as undermining the typical sense of what is real (*that is reality and this isn't*). Karl also constructs believing in parallel-reality discourse as personally disruptive to his understanding of reality, arguing that he should adopt the *more reasonable* belief that mushrooms generate the experience of seeing creatures (they do *something to you which isn't normal*), in order to retain a *sanity perspective*. This constructs believing in parallel-reality discourse as 'mad', as challenging rationality and consensus. However, Karl does not discount the possibility that entities are real (*I can see how it could happen quite easily*) instead he constructs it as a dangerous perspective to adopt. He represents it as something which can be believed in *later on in life*; constructing this shift in belief as a choice that must be postponed until a time where it is less disruptive to his sense of sanity and reality. As such, he constructs that presently he will choose *not to believe in them*; representing his understanding of what mushrooms do as malleable and as something which can be chosen.

Karl's extract demonstrates the difficulty in adopting parallel-reality discourse for some participants, with the dominance of psychological and pharmacological constructions of reality troubling it as a 'mad' and unreasonable construction. However, parallel-reality cannot be entirely dismissed by Karl so he constructs 'choosing not to believe' in this 'mad' perspective as a valuable means of retaining one's sanity. Uncertainty has a value here as a protective construction that allows him to stay 'sane' whilst embracing competing understandings of the 'truth' of what mushrooms do. Uncertainty also allows Karl to partially temper the power of psychological discourse. Whilst he still constructs it as a more 'reasonable' and dominant account he does not construct it as a 'scientific fact'; instead he represents it as a belief of which he is uncertain. Uncertainty and challenge to the status of psychopharmacological discourses as a regime of truth was prevalent in other accounts. Unlike Karl however, rather than express unease with uncertainty, other participants celebrated it.

5.5 Celebrating Uncertainty

Some participants represented both 'psycho-pharmacological' and parallel-reality discourses as equally plausible explanations for what mushrooms do, constructing it as impossible to know which account better represents 'reality'. As such, they celebrated the uncertainty around mushroom experiences and constructed that it was necessary to just 'go with it'. An example can be seen in the extract below from Frank who has used cultivated and indigenous mushrooms and is reflecting upon his experiences of using truffles for questing:

FRANK: *with the sensory deprivation, the first time especially I felt like I went to some sort of spirit world and yeah, was taken on a sort of journey around these different places by a spirit being uh, whether that was my imagination or what I've no idea*

INT: *I was just going to ask you about that, how do you sit on whether that was, is a real place or whether it was something imagined*

FRANK: *yeah no idea (.) could be one or the other could be something in-between um (..) I (.) it seemed, things seemed real at the time in a way, um though it's hard to sort of pinpoint, and I've come to the conclusion that well (.) sort of go with it, I tend to just accept things and say well it might be real it might not be but, there's no point really saying it is or it isn't if you can't be sure*

Pg. 9, 372-381 [Participant 23]

Frank constructs his experience as having *felt like I went to some sort of spirit world* and encountering *a spirit being*, constructions typical of parallel-reality discourse. He then troubles this with the construction that it might have been his *imagination*; a psychological conception. However, Frank maintains a construction of uncertainty throughout his account. He states that he

has *no idea* which construction of his experience is correct, arguing that it *could be one or the other* (imagination or ‘really real’) or *something in-between* (implying an accommodation of the discourses, similar to that offered by Alan in the previous section). Frank represents the difficulty in deciding as due to *things [having] seemed real at the time*; his outlandish experience felt real, but the possibility that it could have been imagined (as constructed through psychological discourse) challenges this. As such, Frank constructs that *you can’t be sure* which construction of experience is true and he therefore advocates ‘accepting’ the uncertainty that *it might be real it might not be*.

Other participants also constructed their experiences as impossible to decide upon and elaborated the reasons why either account is plausible. In the above extract Frank spontaneously provided the construction of uncertainty, for other participants I raised the possibility of either psychological or parallel-reality discourse in the interviews to explore their constructions. This was the case in the extract below from Wendy, who has used purchased cultivated and picked indigenous mushrooms:

INT: *so what do you make of the idea that psychedelics are a gateway to something real, or that they allow you to see something that’s invisible, what’s your take on that*

WENDY: *um (.) I suppose like this sounds a bit kind of sitting on the fence or something but my experience with drugs have always been like, that it’s just this sense of like, well it might be I don’t know it’s like you’re never going to prove it either way (.) but you can’t disprove it either if you see what I mean, like I’m totally open to kind of other worlds carrying on alongside of things and gateways and even magic portals, I’m totally open to all that, but it doesn’t, it doesn’t actually impact on the way I live my daily life if you see what I mean, but I’ve got no, I’m just like, yeah it’s a possibility like whatever (laughs) it’s just like this total it might be it might not*

Pg. 7, 302-12 [Participant 15]

In this extract I introduce the discourse of parallel-reality and Wendy constructs a response which celebrates uncertainty. She represents her construction as *sitting on the fence*: as neither in favour of nor opposed to the tenets of parallel reality discourse. Instead she constructs that her *experience with drugs [has] always* suggested to her that *it might be*, and that *it might not be*, true. Wendy constructs an inability to *prove* or *disprove* whether parallel-realities exist as informing this uncertainty, but represents herself as *totally open to* the existence of *other worlds carrying on alongside of things and gateways and even magic portals*. In spite of this openness she constructs ‘knowing’ whether parallel-reality is true or not as unimportant to her; stating that *it doesn’t actually impact on the way I live my daily life*, a construction that suggests it is neither a priority nor preoccupation for her. Her construction that *it’s a possibility like whatever (laughs)*, jovially

dismisses the question as unimportant and further illustrates her lack of concern or interest in what is 'really real' where mushroom experiences are concerned.

Wendy and Frank both offer constructions of considering the possibility that parallel-reality discourse might represent reality; that alternate dimensions and entities might exist beyond our world. However, neither fully endorses this construction, but they also do not entirely endorse or reject psychological discourse. Frank's account is one of uncertainty based on experience; he constructs the sense of realness of his experiences when using mushroom as causing him to doubt psychological discourse as entirely explanatory. Wendy constructs her uncertainty through a combination of inability to prove or disprove either account, and a lack of interest in determining what is 'true'. The extract below from Erica, who has used cultivated mushrooms, further celebrates uncertainty by constructing a lack of concern for what is 'true' and advocates embracing pragmatism:

INT: so do you think that experiences with mushrooms just sort of alter your brain, or are, is it sort of, is it that they perhaps connect you to another reality, or something more outside yourself

ERICA: it feels like they connect me to another reality, but I can understand it just being something in my brain you know, some chemical, you are a psychologist you know how this kind of thing works, I'm sure it could just be something in my brain but it feels, and I think feeling is really important, it feels like it's coming from outside, like I don't know, but I know lots of things happen with the brain and it could just be some sort of chemical affecting a certain part of my brain (.) I don't really care, I mean all I care is the experience that I gain from it, it doesn't matter if it's all in my mind or if it's out there

Pg. 9-10, 386-393[Participant 17]

At the start of the extract I introduce both parallel-reality and psychological discourses. In responding Erica distinguishes between *feeling* and *understanding*; between her subjective experience which she represents as informed by parallel-reality discourse, and her more abstract knowledge which is taken from psychological discourse. Erica constructs that *it feels like [mushrooms] connect me to another reality*. But, she contends that this feeling can be undermined by her understanding of *how this kind of thing works*; that it is *some sort of chemical affecting a certain part of my brain* (the psychopharmacology of psilocybin) which elicits this feeling. As such, she presents both what she feels and what she thinks as possibilities in conflict, constructing herself as unable to decide if what she feels or what's she thinks is true. To overcome this uncertainty Erica states that she does not *really care*; asserting that *it doesn't matter if it's all in my mind or if it's out there*, instead prioritizing *the experience that I gain from it* as important. She represents knowing if mushroom experiences are *coming from outside* (parallel-reality) or

something in my brain (psychology) as a secondary and unimportant concern to the immediate experience of taking magic mushrooms.

By celebrating uncertainty participants were able to transcend the dichotomy presented by the discourses of 'reality'. Uncertainty allows them to reject the potential mobilization of 'psycho-pharmacological' discourses as a regime of truth; constructing these discourses as providing merely a possible explanation of what mushrooms do. Uncertainty also allows participants to avoid fully endorsing the 'mad' position of parallel-reality discourse; constructing it as a possible explanation based on experience. As such, this construction allows participants to sidestep the issue of 'truth' and power between discourses; neither psycho-pharmacological nor parallel-reality discourses have to be taken up as true or marginalized as ludicrous or implausible. Instead uncertainty allows participants to construct their experiences in pragmatic terms, and to construct themselves as less concerned with the 'truth' of what mushrooms 'really' do and as more interested in simply experiencing them.

5.6 Summary: Chapter 5 What Magic Mushrooms Do: 'Altering Reality'

In constructing accounts of what magic mushrooms do (how they alter perceived reality) participants drew upon three principle discourses. Firstly, *pharmacological discourse* which constitutes mushrooms as occasioning experiences through their pharmacological action: constructing them as 'just drugs'. Secondly, *psychological discourse*, which constitutes magic mushrooms as occasioning experiences shaped by a user's 'mind and brain'. This discourse was developed via constructions of mushrooms as a 'neuro-psychedelic' (manifesting hidden capabilities of the brain), as a 'hallucinogen' (occasioning illusory experiences emanating from the users' mind) and as amplifying a users' psychological 'orientation' and existing 'beliefs'. Thirdly, *parallel-reality discourse* which constituted magic mushrooms as 'breaking the veil' between dimensions: allowing users to perceive typically hidden parallel metaphysical realities, populated with supernatural 'entities'. This discourse constructs the parallel-realities and entities made perceptible when using mushrooms as existing exogenously to the user, making it is possible to 'quest' to and explore these realms.

The relationship between the discourses was characterized by 'psycho-pharmacological' discourses status as a 'regime of truth' (Letcher 2007). Parallel-reality discourse is beyond this 'regime of truth' as it conceptualizes metaphysical realms as existing independently of the user (Letcher 2007). In negotiating this dichotomy participants constructed a *rejection of parallel-reality discourse*; representing it as an implausible belief in contrast to the 'truth' of psycho-pharmacological discourses. Other participants *attempted accommodation* of the discourses; re-conceptualizing the psychobiological action of psilocybin as the means by which the metaphysical

is perceived. However, the need to accommodate psychological discourse further evidences its power: it can be modified but not rejected due to its status as 'truth'. Avoiding the difficulty of negotiating these discourses was achieved through constructions of uncertainty, which enabled participants to avoid the potential 'insanity' of accepting parallel-reality discourse as 'true', whilst not denying the significance of their experiences. Constructions of uncertainty therefore enabled participants to side-step the dichotomy of 'psycho-pharmacological' and parallel-reality discourses as explanations of what mushrooms do. By *celebrating uncertainty* participants could position both discourses as equally possible and incomplete explanations of what mushrooms do, shifting the focus from concern about the nature of the reality which mushrooms alter, to simply going with the experiences magic mushrooms occasion.

In the next chapter I will explore constructions of what magic mushrooms are. This is a related but distinct area in participants' construction of the meaning of magic mushrooms, focusing on the constitution of mushrooms as experiential objects.

Chapter 6: What Magic Mushrooms Are: Natural Drugs or Beings with Agency

Magic mushrooms have been subjected to a number of competing conceptions of what they are: how they are constituted as objects, substances and even beings varies across time and in different cultures. In the present data set two distinct discourses were generated which construct what magic mushrooms are in different ways. Firstly, a *discourse of naturalness* where mushrooms are constructed as a distinct type of ‘natural’ drug which is safer and more appropriate to consume than synthetic substances, and which should not be legally classified due to its status as a ‘natural product’. The second is a *discourse of mushroom agency* which enabled constructions of mushrooms as more than drugs, instead constituting them as spiritual beings or gods which possess agency and which can act as ‘teachers’ revealing ‘neo-archaic’ truths about humanity’s relationship with the natural world. Whilst these discourses may seem divergent and separate they share the common feature of being discourses of distinction: constituting mushrooms as objects and beings which are different and superior to other substances. As such, I shall also explore a third position of *scepticism towards discourses of distinction*: constructions which are rooted in the representation of mushrooms as ‘just drugs’.

6.1 Discourse of Naturalness

This discourse constitutes magic mushrooms as a product of the natural world; representing them as a ‘natural’ recreational drug and as a biological entity. The discourse of naturalness enables participants to position magic mushrooms (and other ‘natural’ drugs) as superior to ‘synthetic’ recreational substances. It allows them to construct mushrooms as safer than ‘manmade’ drugs, as appropriate for humans to consume, and supports the argument that mushrooms should be exempt from legal classification. This discourse operates to legitimise and justify the use of magic mushrooms, through constructions which constitute them as a ‘natural product’ and which afford mushrooms distinct properties due to their ‘naturalness’.

6.1.1 ‘Natural’ vs. ‘Man-made’ Drugs

In representing magic mushrooms as a ‘natural drug’ with distinct properties, participants positioned them in contrast to ‘manmade’ substances. This can be seen in the extract below from Greg, who has repeatedly used picked indigenous mushrooms and has once purchased cultivated mushrooms. This extract follows a comment Greg made about the enjoyment he gets from picking both edible and psychoactive mushrooms:

INT: *so is there anything about magic mushrooms growing in the wild that appeals*

GREG: *oh definitely I think, I mean you know you think of something like LSD, which has been manufactured or ecstasy and you do, well for me at least I have the conception of some mad scientist (laughs) making it out of a variety of unsavoury substances, but magic mushrooms are just things that grow out of the ground, and at the end of the day you're not putting anything, I mean I don't like this term really but you're not putting anything unnatural into your body and um, they I do certainly perceive it as being a relatively wholesome drug for that reason, and I'm sure other people do too*

Pg. 9, 435-441 [Skype] [Participant 8]

In elaborating the appeal of obtaining wild mushrooms, Greg constructs a dichotomy between manmade and natural drugs. He positions *manufactured* drugs (*LSD* and *ecstasy*) as potentially dangerous; constructing an image of a *mad scientist* (implying a villain) concocting them from *unsavoury substances*. As such, he constructs manmade drugs as undesirable, due to uncertainty about their chemical contents and the scrupulousness of their manufacture. In contrast, Greg constructs magic mushrooms as an unadulterated substance; as *just things that grow out of the ground* which can be obtained in a pure form from *the wild* (a construction which reflects that he has primarily consumed picked indigenous mushrooms). This distinction between the manmade and the natural is furthered by his representation of mushrooms, unlike *manufactured* drugs, as not an *unnatural* substance to consume.

However, Greg adds the disclaimer that he does not *like this term... unnatural*; challenging a strong distinction between the 'natural' and the 'unnatural'. This reaffirms his construction that it is the uncertainty which surrounds the *manufacture* of drugs like *LSD* which makes him mistrustful, rather than their being inherently unnatural. As such, the 'naturalness' of mushrooms is constructed as providing reassurance; that they can be obtained in a 'pure' unprocessed state as a fungal body from the ground renders them safe. Greg further establishes the position that mushrooms are safer and more desirable than manmade drugs by constructing them as *a relatively wholesome drug*; implying that they are more salubrious than other substances, because of the 'purity' that comes with their 'natural' status. This construction of mushrooms as a superior natural drug shares features with discourses concerning organic food (food produced without the use of chemical pesticides or without chemical additives); that a product which is 'natural' or unadulterated is healthier, and more appropriate to consume than ones which have been chemically altered or processed (Hughner et al 2007).

In the extract above Greg is referring to indigenous mushrooms which he picks in season. Other participants extended the construction of mushrooms as a reassuringly natural drug, distinct from manufactured substances, to those which are artificially cultivated and sold. In the extract below

Dominic, who has exclusively used purchased cultivated truffles in Amsterdam, is responding to a question about his drug use:

DOMINIC: *I mean I do weed hash shrooms seems sort of, for me personally like, I don't think it's as damaging, I think Mandy ecstasy and cocaine is damaging to you, weed there's arguments for and against, but I think that's the furthest I would ever go, it's natural that's what I think it's natural, I don't smoke skunk or do pills, it's all God's green earth that gives me a bit more, sort of peace of mind it's not been tampered with or anything as far as I'm aware*

INT: *OK so is that mushrooms are natural quite important to you*

DOMINIC: *yeah I don't like the fact that it's all like human made heated up put into pills and stuff I don't like the human connection*

Pg. 4, 186-193 [Participant 16]

Dominic uses the discourse of naturalness to construct mushrooms as a pure and unadulterated substance, extending this construction to cannabis (*it's all God's green earth*- a strong construction of natural purity). In contrast he positions other substances which are typically thought of as manufactured (*pills*- ecstasy or other chemical stimulants) or in some way altered by human agency (*skunk* – cannabis selectively cross-bred to increase potency, Wylie, Scott & Burnett 1995) as undesirable. Dominic constructs a mistrust of the *human connection* with manufactured drugs (a similar construction to that offered by Greg above), implying that it is the agency of an unknown manufacturer that renders *human made* drugs worrisome; the fear that they may be impure and contaminated. In contrast Dominic positions 'natural' substances as safer, stating that he gets *peace of mind* from consuming drugs which have *not been tampered with*. However, having only ever purchased mushrooms (and cannabis) he adds the caveat that this lack of tampering is *as far as I'm aware*, acknowledging that it is still possible they have been altered in some way.

In spite of this caveat Dominic uses the constructed 'naturalness' of mushrooms and cannabis to position them as safer and 'healthier' than potentially *damaging* chemical alternatives. In doing so he deploys the discourse of naturalness to justify his consumption of the substances he favours (*weed, shrooms*). He also constructs himself as a 'natural drug user' (*that's the furthest I would ever go, it's natural*), positioning himself as a responsible, safe and healthy drug user who only consumes substances which aren't *as damaging* because they are 'natural'.

Constructing mushrooms as unadulterated natural products allows participants to position them as superior to other chemically rendered substances. Whether picked or purchased (and as such artificially cultivated), mushrooms are constructed as superior due to their 'purity'; they are consumed as a relatively unprocessed (either fresh or dried) fruiting fungal body. This

understanding was also extended to other ‘natural’ substances, namely cannabis. This may be due in part to cannabis also being constructed as ‘unprocessed’, since it is the dried buds of a plant. In contrast pills and powders are represented as an inferior and dangerous unknown, potentially concocted from unsavory chemicals by unscrupulous individuals. As such, the discourse of naturalness is drawn upon by participants to justify their use of mushrooms (and cannabis), positioning ingesting a known and seemingly pure natural product as a ‘safer’ and ‘healthier’ practice, due to the association between naturalness and salubriousness.

In the extracts above both participants represent their drug use as restricted to ‘natural’ products; mushrooms and cannabis. Some participants extended the discourse of naturalness beyond these seemingly ‘natural’ substances to include chemical substances with an organic base (e.g. cocaine). However, they still represented entirely ‘manmade’ substances as troubling. In the extract below Wendy, who has consumed cultivated varieties and picked indigenous mushrooms, is elaborating why she first tried magic mushrooms:

WENDY: *I wanted to try everything, um I was unsure about LSD because it's man-made, always been a bit funny about man-made things, I know that mushrooms grow, even not necessarily in this country, but even if it's cultivated it's still a mushroom, um so there's this sense of at that stage of my life I wanted to try it, I think it's as plain as that*

INT: *have you always gone for sort of um more natural drugs avoided the man-made*

WENDY: *yeah although (.) yeah I suppose all things I know some get messed about but, all things are natural except certain ones like LSD, that's totally man-made, don't want to mess with that cause some guy in a lab made it, but yeah even cocaine has got a natural element to it (.) yeah*

INT: *so even with the bought shrooms*

WENDY: *yeah hell yeah, it's there it grows so have it, like it seems logical to take it*

Pg. 2, 77-86 [Participant 15]

In Wendy's extract the construction that *even if it's cultivated* a mushroom is *still a mushroom* seems to illustrate a core aspect of the discourse; that because mushrooms, whether wild or grown artificially, can be categorically grouped into ‘natural’ produce (along with items such as fruit and vegetables and other ‘natural drugs’ such as cannabis), they are positioned as a safe, unadulterated, and (relatively) salubrious drug. It is the property of mushrooms being mushrooms, a fungus as opposed to a ‘manmade’ chemical, which informs this construction of the natural. Whilst the construction is not entirely independent of the mushrooms physicality (they are fungi after all), it is itself a function of discourse. This can be seen when Wendy extends this construction of ‘naturalness’ to substances which do not share this obvious ‘natural’ physicality.

She constructs entirely *man-made* substances (giving the example of *LSD*) as suspicious (*always been a bit funny about*) due to the human agency involved in artificially generating them. She constructs LSD as dubious or dangerous because of its manufacture by *some guy in a lab* (a similar construction to the *mad scientist* figure offered by Greg above), stating she will not *mess with that*; a phrase that implies consuming it is a risky undertaking. However, Wendy constructs only those substances which are *totally manmade* as undesirable, expressing no problem with adulterated substances (*some get messed about*) which have a *natural element* to them, giving the example of cocaine (a drug she elsewhere reports enjoying).

The discourse of naturalness was sometimes extended further than mushrooms and cannabis (substances which are more typically considered 'natural'), to other 'chemical' substances (cocaine) in order to justify their use. This expansion of the concept of 'naturalness' and what constitutes a 'natural' drug, reveals the security this construction offers; it allows even drugs typically considered harmful (and constructed negatively by other participants, such as Greg and Dominic above) to be legitimised as partly 'natural' in origin and therefore safer or less worrisome to consume. The expansion of the discourse to other 'natural' yet adulterated substances also serves the purposes of justifying and legitimising use. It would be interesting to consider if tablets of synthetic psilocybin (the psychoactive chemical in magic mushrooms) were constructed in the same way.

Wendy ends her account by positioning the 'naturalness' and existence of magic mushrooms as a product of nature as a *logical* reason to consume them (*hell yeah it's there it grows so have it*). This sentence belies a further aspect of the discourse which constructs mushroom consumption as appropriate because it is 'natural to take them'.

6.1.2 'It's 'natural' to take them'

The 'naturalness' of magic mushrooms was represented by some participants as legitimising their use; the construction of mushrooms as a fungus which exists in nature was used to justify and endorse their consumption. This construction was not limited to picked indigenous mushrooms but was also extended to cultivated mushrooms (grown artificially from spores) which participants purchased either legally or illegally. In the extract below Erica who has exclusively used purchased cultivated mushrooms, offers an argument that it is 'natural' to take them:

INT: *as you say mushrooms are older and natural, um is that what appeals to you about them*

ERICA: *yes (.) I mean I don't think anything happens (.) I do believe in coincidence but I don't think most things happen from coincidence, I mean mushrooms have evolved, why are they there, I think animals probably even eat mushrooms so I mean, I think it's perfectly natural for people to do that whereas with Acid it's just made up in a laboratory, um it's completely different I think because it's nature versus something that was made in a lab*

Pg. 9, 352-360 [Participant 17]

Erica draws upon a discourse of naturalness to construct the appropriateness of mushroom consumption. She constructs a dichotomy between the natural and the man-made (*nature versus something that was made in a lab*) and in doing so positions the synthetic as inferior to the natural (*Acid it's just made up in a laboratory, um it's completely different*). 'Just' in this sense is used as a dismissive term, constructing *Acid* (LSD) as lesser because it is manufactured. In contrast Erica represents consuming mushrooms as *perfectly natural for people to do*; the implication being that because mushrooms are natural, their consumption is appropriate. Erica develops this by drawing on an evolutionary discourse (*mushrooms have evolved*) implying that because mushrooms have evolved 'with us' they should be consumed. She furthers this by postulating that *animals probably even eat mushrooms*; implicitly asserting that because other animals (hypothetically) consume them so should we. Erica's assertion that the presence of mushrooms in nature is not coincidental (*I don't think most things happen from coincidence*) and the posing of a rhetorical question about their existence (*why are they there*) further constructs ingesting mushrooms as appropriate, suggesting that they exist to be taken.

Implied in the extract above is the notion that it is appropriate to consume mushrooms because they are a natural product of evolution and so are human beings. This construction of humans and mushrooms as compatible and mutually evolved products of nature is developed in the extract below from Victor, who has purchased cultivated and indigenous mushrooms (mushrooms others have picked and sold) in Eastern Europe and the UK. This extract is from an account he offered of the qualitative differences between LSD and mushrooms:

VICTOR: *with mushrooms they are gentler it's more organic I think, I'm not sure but I think the chemicals in mushrooms uh, make you feel, the chemicals in mushrooms have an effect in your mind or in your brain first you know, like the neurons which evoke a more natural presence, and uh contemplation uh focus I don't know I'm losing my words*

INT: *it's OK don't worry*

VICTOR: *but with LSD, I think maybe because LSD hasn't had time to evolve because it's just been here for what, less than 100 years, but mushrooms have been here all the time (.) so maybe they had time to evolve maybe that's why, they're more complex, more complex structure is more compatible with our human organic brain (.) I mean they are organic and you are organic you know*

Pg.10, 428-436 [Participant 10]

Victor establishes a dichotomy between mushrooms and LSD, positioning mushrooms as superior due to their being *gentler* (less psychologically intense) and occasioning experiences of *a more natural presence* (though hard to articulate he elaborates this as *contemplation* and *focus*). He attributes magic mushrooms' ability to evoke these experiences to their status as an *organic* or natural product (the unstated opposite in this account is that LSD experiences are 'less natural'; artificial or not akin with the natural world). Victor constructs an explanation of this distinction by drawing upon the discourse of evolution (*LSD hasn't had time to evolve ... mushrooms have been here all the time so maybe they had time to evolve*), to support his hierarchical distinction. The metaphor of evolution references 'the great chain of being' (Haraway 1991); a biological discourse which positions organisms at the top of the chain as 'more evolved' and superior to 'less evolved' organisms lower down the chain. The implication of this construction is that mushrooms are biologically superior to LSD, as they are a 'more evolved' natural substance. Victor adds (pseudo) scientific authority to this construction through use of pharmacological discourse (*the chemicals in mushrooms...have an effect...in your brain*); positioning mushrooms as possessing a *more complex chemical structure* due to their being more evolved.

Evoking evolution also serves to construct mushrooms and humans as mutually complex biological entities; *they are organic and you are organic* constructs an equivalence between humans and mushrooms as 'natural' products of evolution. This biological equivalence is used to explain the superiority of mushrooms as their (constructed) complex chemical structure is *more compatible with our human organic brain*; the shared property of being *organic* products of evolution are what make humans and mushrooms compatible. This construction adds weight to Victor's representation of the naturalness of mushrooms as that which makes them appropriate to ingest.

In both Erica and Victor's accounts selective deployments of scientific discourses (evolution and pharmacology) are used to bolster and elaborate claims that it is 'natural' (appropriate or right) to take mushrooms because they are 'natural' (biological agents which have evolved in tandem with human beings). Underlying this construction is a nebulous sense that 'natural' biological objects exist to be ingested and are beneficial and appropriate to take, in contrast with 'manmade'

substances. Again, this serves to construct mushrooms as superior to other drugs and to legitimise their use.

Having established mushrooms as appropriate to use because of their ‘naturalness’ some participants extended this construction further, arguing that ‘naturalness’ is a property which should exempt magic mushrooms from legal classification.

6.1.3 ‘It’s wrong to make nature illegal’

The construction of magic mushrooms as ‘natural’ not only serves to construct them as appropriate to use, it also allowed participants to forcefully challenge the status of psilocybin mushrooms as illegal. Several participants argued that the natural status of mushrooms (and other ‘unprocessed’ drugs like cannabis), should afford them exemption from legal classification. In the extract below Alice, who uses picked indigenous mushrooms on a seasonal basis, offers a construction of this type. The extract is taken from a discussion about mushroom use after the UK Drugs Act 2005 rendered both cultivated varieties and picked indigenous magic mushrooms illegal:

ALICE: it just seems completely mad to me that it’s illegal, because it’s like that mushroom growing in that field that you go to, and then as soon as you pick it all of a sudden you’ve broken the law it’s like, just it just seems insane that something that just grows is like illegal, I just can’t it’s just so ridiculous, it’s like making buttercups illegal or something (laughs) it’s just like what

Pg. 5, 258-261 [Participant 3]

Alice strongly rejects the current illegal status of magic mushrooms and draws upon a discourse of naturalness to justify her position. She constructs magic mushrooms as wild and natural products; as things which *just grow in fields*. Alice then represents the ‘naturalness’ of mushrooms as a property which should exempt them from legislation, constructing it as unnatural and irrational (*mad, ridiculous*) to ban the wild and natural (*seems insane that something that just grows is like illegal*). She also constructs a subtle linkage between the act of foraging for mushrooms (*as soon as you pick it all of a sudden you’ve broken the law*) and the illegality of the mushrooms themselves; equating their natural occurrence (which is not illegal) with their being obtained for consumption (which is illegal) in order to construct the law as irrational. The humorous analogy Alice constructs representing psychoactive mushrooms as equivalent to other, non-psychoactive flora that grow in fields (*it’s like making buttercups illegal*) supports her argument that it is absurd to legislate against substances which occur in the natural environment. This construction echoes previous accounts which represent mushrooms as appropriate to consume because they are ‘natural products’.

Alice restricts her argument that the illegality of magic mushrooms is wrong to picked indigenous mushrooms; representing the mushrooms status as 'wild' as that which makes their classification inappropriate. Other participants extended this to purchased and cultivated mushrooms as well. In the extract below Frank, who has used legally and illegally obtained, cultivated and indigenous mushrooms, offers a broader construction drawing upon naturalness:

INT: *do you miss them being legal*

FRANK: *yeah I think it's outrageous*

INT: *really*

FRANK: *yeah um, things like things like you know cocaine heroin I can understand, that are sort of manufactured, but something that grows naturally like marijuana and mushrooms, to say something that grows, you can't put it in your own body is disgraceful (.) I mean it's not harmful to people, yeah you could have a bad trip and if you are, not sort of a mentally stable person prone to schizophrenia or whatever, it could have very bad effects with you but it could also have good effects who knows, but um (.) you can't I don't think you should be banning things because a few people can't handle it*

Pg. 12-13, 519-528 [Participant 23]

In justifying his argument that it is *outrageous* that mushrooms are illegal, Frank constructs a dichotomy between natural and man-made drugs. Frank constructs the ingestion (*put it in your own body*) of 'natural' drugs (*something that grows-* providing the examples of *marijuana and mushrooms*) as appropriate, and implies it ought to be a right by representing the prohibition of it as *disgraceful*. This construction implicitly equates organic psychoactive plants with humans as organic biological beings; that we should be able to consume things which 'grow' as they are products of a nature which we are also a part of (a similar construction to Victor and Erica above).

In contrast Frank constructs it as understandable that *sort of manufactured* drugs (*cocaine, heroin*) are illegal. By constructing the *manufactured* status of these drugs as the criteria by which they are made justifiably illegal, Frank establishes a dichotomy between natural and 'manmade' substances, with the manmade represented as dangerous. This dichotomy is central to this discourse, as all previous participants have drawn a similar distinction. As such, Frank constructs it as 'natural' to consume plants/fungi which grow as unprocessed 'natural products' in contrast to 'manufactured' substances. As an aside, cocaine and heroin are substances derived from plant products (Julien 2004), but Frank does not consider this, focusing instead upon their status as 'manufactured' as that which makes them questionable (in contrast to Wendy above who included cocaine in her construction of 'natural' drugs). This is further evidence of the complicated negotiation of what constitutes 'natural' in peoples use of this discourse.

Frank introduces a second argument about why mushrooms should be legal; that of their relatively low instance of harm (*I mean it's not harmful to people*, whilst adding the caveat that *a few people can't handle it*). It could also be argued that harm is a feature of the *manufactured* drugs Frank gives as examples of substances which should be illegal, as both cocaine and heroin are stereotypical 'hard' drugs associated with biological and social harms (Plant 2003). However, it is not clear in Frank's account if constructions of harm are linked to constructions of 'naturalness', or if they are an additional aspect of his argument for and against the classification of certain drugs.

What also needs to be considered in the context of both Alice and Frank's accounts is that they have lived through the change in the legal status of psilocybin mushrooms. The advent of the Drugs Act 2005 instantly repositioned mushrooms from being legally tolerated as an 'unprocessed' fungi (either purchased or picked, mushrooms had to be 'fresh' to be legal), to being criminalized and classified as a Class A in all forms (Walsh 2006). As such, they have experienced themselves being positioned as criminals and are emphatically rejecting this position through their use of a discourse of naturalness. The 'naturalness' of mushrooms, whether picked or cultivated, is again constructed as a property which should afford them special status. Not only is it appropriate to use them because they are evolved products of nature, a nature that we 'share' by also being biological entities, it is also inappropriate to cast people as criminals for wanting to ingest something which is 'natural'.

In summary, a discourse of naturalness affords magic mushrooms a special status due to their being constructed as an unadulterated 'natural product'. It enables mushrooms to be positioned as superior to other manmade substances, to be constructed as appropriate to ingest, and is used to argue forcefully against their legal classification. Whilst this discourse serves to legitimize the use of mushrooms by constructing them as a distinct drug, the position is still maintained that mushrooms are 'drugs'. I shall now explore a discourse which still affords mushrooms a special status through their relationship with 'naturalness', but which constructs them as something more than drugs.

6.2 Discourse of Mushroom Agency

This discourse enables participants to construct magic mushrooms as beings which can act with agency. This agency is twofold. Firstly an explicit construction of agency, where magic mushrooms are constructed as spiritual entities which possess a consciousness and which are able to exert control over the kind of experiences one may have. Secondly an implicit agency, in which magic mushrooms are constructed as revealing radical 'truths' about humanity's relationship with the natural world and as able to provide a new perspective for those that use them. In constituting what magic mushrooms are this discourse is a departure from other understandings of mushrooms as

drugs, natural products and material agents, representing them instead as beings with spirits, agency, and the ability to be revelatory.

6.2.1 Mushroom Spirits and Mushroom Gods

The first aspect of this discourse is the construction of magic mushrooms as beings with agency. Magic mushrooms are constructed as having a 'spirit' (an incorporeal consciousness), or as connected to 'mushrooms gods' (spiritual deities). This is an animist construction of what mushrooms are; a metaphysical perspective which constructs natural entities as imbued with a spiritual essence (Harvey 2005). A construction of this type can be seen in the extract below from Simon (a self-identified practitioner of contemporary occultism), who has consumed picked indigenous and cultivated varieties of mushrooms. The extract is from a discussion about the use of psychedelics in ritual magic.

***SIMON:** there's a quality about mushrooms which is very tricky, more um quirky, so it's very hard to pin it down and consistently use it at all, although, of course every time you take it it's kind of a bit of, so are we going to be able to get any magic done on this or not, we don't know can quite often be the case (laughs)*

***INT:** so is there a random element with it*

***SIMON:** there is yes, because the mushrooms just might decide you're not going to that day, you know, there's that sort of quality to that that particular sacrament I think, they do seem to possess a spirit, there's something so quirky and personality like about them, yeah*

Pg. 4, 164- 172 [Participant 6]

Simon constructs magic mushrooms as a difficult *sacrament to consistently use* for the purposes of *magic*; they are hard to incorporate into group ritual practices as a means of enhancing or undertaking a magical rite. He attributes this difficulty to their being unpredictable, constructing them as having a *tricky* or *quirky quality*. When questioned about this quirkiness, Simon constructs mushrooms as having agency; constructing them as able to *decide* if the desired outcome of their ingestion will or will not occur (*the mushrooms just might decide you're not going to that day*). He elaborates this construction of mushrooms as having agency, stating that they *possess a spirit* (an incorporeal consciousness) and have a *personality like* quality to them (implying a subjective character). This positions them as more than mushrooms; it personifies them and imbues them with a quality of being which is beyond their material status as psychoactive fungi.

However, Simon is tentative in his construction of mushrooms as spiritual beings; disclaiming that a spirit is something they *seem to possess* and that there is something *personality like about them* (similar to, but not the same as, 'personality'). In doing so he avoids committing entirely to this

construction, leaving open the possibility that this position is a product of his subjective experience rather than a pronouncement upon the reality of what mushrooms are like. His reticence to fully endorse this representation in the research interview may be due to the unusualness of this construction; it is outside of 'normality' and as such is risky to fully adopt as it challenges consensus and scientific understandings (in a similar way that Parallel-reality Discourse did in Chapter 5). In spite of this, Simons' extract introduces the notion that magic mushrooms can possess agency, that they can make decisions about the nature of the experiences they occasion.

This conception of mushrooms as conscious entities that possess agency is further elaborated by Olivia who has used exotic mushrooms in Central America. She provides a construction of mushrooms as powerful spiritual beings which choose the kinds of trips one can have.

OLIVIA: *you can actually feel they have spirits of their own somehow, they can be very different and you know they grow in families so as well as like, I don't know, they have like a spirit of their own, I don't know if this makes sense*

INT: *no no it does*

OLIVIA: *it sounds wacky I know (laughs)*

INT: *don't worry about sounding wacky*

OLIVIA: *it's just like you know um (.) yeah they just grow in families so you know sometimes you pick just one on its own and it's really big, and it's you know powerful like you can feel that they have some sort of personality of their own, and you know when you're having them that you're dealing with something very powerful (.) it's not just like a line of cocaine or something, it's something more strong*

INT: *and does that influence the kind of experience you have*

OLIVIA: *I think I think it does (.) actually I've heard of people that, uh, that sometimes eat a lot of them and don't even have a trip*

INT: *nothing at all*

OLIVIA: *yes nothing at all so it's like, if they don't want you to trip for some reason or they punish you, for example I know friends who did a lot of chemical drugs and had bad experiences on mushrooms afterwards because they were not like, really clean (.) so they knew they were doing something wrong, the mushrooms kind of telling you like, why are you doing this you know*

Pg. 2-3, 100-118 [Participant 19]

Olivia states that it is possible to *feel* that individual mushrooms *have spirits* (an incorporeal conscious energy or soul) or *personality*, implying that mushrooms possess an individual character and attributes associated with a conscious being. Olivia associates this construction of mushrooms as having a *spirit* with their being *powerful*. This construction suggests that Olivia is not referring

to chemical potency, but to something metaphysical; it is the mushrooms spirit which means *you're dealing with something very powerful* when consuming them. Olivia reinforces this by positioning a 'hard' yet chemically processed (and therefore 'spiritless') narcotic in contrast; that mushrooms are *not just like a line of cocaine* but are *something more strong* implies that cocaine is 'just' a drug, whereas mushrooms are something more than this. That something more is the 'strength' and 'power' mushrooms have as a result of their *spirit*, a construction which constitutes them as supernatural or spiritual entities.

Olivia also represents mushrooms as powerful conscious entities by constructing them as having agency. She asserts that they can decide to prevent people from experiencing their subjective effects (*if they don't want you to trip for some reason*) regardless of how large a dose someone ingests (*eat a lot of them and don't even have a trip*). This constructs mushroom experiences as more than a product of organic chemistry; representing them instead as metaphysical decisions made by the mushrooms 'spirit'. She furthers the construction of mushroom agency by constructing them as being able to *punish you with bad experiences* if they aren't approached with sufficient reverence. This construction serves to establish and police appropriate and inappropriate behaviour around taking magic mushrooms. The example Olivia provides is an anecdote of friends who used *a lot of chemical drugs*, which rendered them *not like really clean*. By taking mushrooms whilst 'unclean' her friends *knew they were doing something wrong*; a construction which establishes taking other 'chemical' substances as a known transgression or taboo (echoing the distinction between synthetic and natural products which characterised the previous 'discourse of naturalness'). Olivia constructs the punitive actions of mushrooms as serving to inform (to *tell you like, why are you doing this*); as a lesson to encourage users to consider their actions and to engage in appropriate use. Implied but unsaid here is that there is a right way to use mushrooms, one of reverence and respect when one is 'clean'.

Whilst Olivia demonstrates conviction in her account supported with anecdotes of friends who have been denied or punished by mushrooms, she expresses awareness that the idea of mushrooms possessing a spirit is marginal in the context of the research interview. She declares that it *sounds wacky I know* and seeks reassurance from the interviewer before detailing her representation of mushroom spirits. Both Olivia and Simon acknowledge that this is an unusual construction of what magic mushrooms are; that they are spiritual entities with the agency to decide the nature of the experiences they occasion. What Olivia's extract adds to this construction of agency is that mushrooms can act judgementally; that they establish through 'punishment' (bad trips or no trips) how they 'ought' to be consumed. The construction that mushrooms can act punitively if not treated appropriately is further developed in the extract below. This extract is from Wendy, who has used picked indigenous and legally purchased cultivated mushrooms, and is part of an exchange about the prevalence of drug myths:

INT: *so, do you feel there's a mythology around psychedelics then*

WENDY: *yeah that's what I've always found, definitely with magic mushrooms, like my friend Pete always used to say about appeasing the mushroom gods, that if you go into it with too much fun they'll give you a bad trip to remind you that you're fucking with something bigger than you realise, and I always used to remember Pete saying that, and I used to think it when I had bad trips that maybe I'd done something to upset the mushroom gods but I never really bought into it like he did, it felt like an old wives' tale (laughs) more than like an actuality or something*

INT: *more of a rhetorical device than something you believed*

WENDY: *yeah*

INT: *so the idea of the mushroom as conscious or stuff like that*

WENDY: *yeah no not my thing*

Pg. 9, 398-408 [Participant 15]

Wendy provides this construction as an example of a tacit mythology a friend of hers (*Pete*) 'believed' and espoused. She constructs this mythology as a one of *mushroom gods*; representing magic mushrooms as watched over by powerful quasi-religious or spiritual entities (*gods*). She constructs the *mushroom gods* as having the agency to act punitively; they require *appeasing* or *they'll give you a bad trip* (a similar construction to one provided by Olivia above). Wendy constructs the reason for punishment as due to going *into* [taking mushrooms] *with too much fun*; positioning 'excessive' (*too much*) recreational use (*fun*) as in some way disrespectful. Bad trips are therefore attributed to a failure on the part of the user, and are constructed as a lesson from the mushroom gods to *remind you that you're fucking with something bigger than you realise*. This is a pseudo-spiritual construction (*bigger than you realise* constructs the experience as significant) which implicitly represents mushroom experiences as something which should be approached with reverence and which should not to be treated trivially (*fucking with* implies trivial engagement), for fear of offending the gods. As such, this mythological construction serves to police how mushrooms are used; constructing overly recreational use in the absence of reverence or respect (*too much fun*) as a pseudo 'religious' taboo which may *upset the mushroom gods*.

Whilst this extract provides a spiritualised construction of what mushrooms are Wendy distances herself from it. She dismisses it as *an old wives' tale* (a questionable superstition) instead of *an actuality*. In contrast she positions her friend as buying *into it* in a more literal sense. Whilst Wendy states that this position is *not my thing* (constructing it as something one choses to believe in) her account still demonstrates that this construction of what mushrooms are, which is both spiritual and serves to police appropriate use.

The similarity between the constitution of mushrooms as spirits and as deities in their own right is that they are constructed as acting with agency. Mushrooms are represented as able to make decisions about whether or not a desired experience is obtained, and to punish with ‘bad trips’ those who transgress the boundaries of respectful and reverent use. There is also similarity in the attribution of ‘being’ to mushrooms as more than psychoactive fungi; constructing what magic mushrooms are in supernatural and personified terms, as entities rather than as drugs. However, in all three extracts participants indicate an awareness of the marginality of this construction, disclaiming it as ‘wacky’, presenting it tentatively, or disowning it as something which others believe. Nevertheless, the notion that mushrooms can behave with agency is a prevalent one, which also informs the next part of this discourse; that magic mushrooms can show users a more ‘natural truth’.

6.2.2 Teachers of ‘Neo-Archaic Truth’

The second aspect of the discourse of mushroom agency constructs magic mushrooms as teachers which show the person who consumes them ‘truths’ about the relationship between humans and the natural world. Mushrooms are constructed as providing insight into the need for a closer relationship with nature. This can be seen in the following extract from Owen who has picked indigenous mushrooms and purchased truffles online. He is responding to a question about whether mushrooms enable spiritual experiences:

OWEN: you definitely have a sense, I definitely have a sense, of the mushrooms teaching me that things are very um (.) you get these naturalistic elements to it, that things are all connected I mean, I didn’t feel different from the trees or the ground or the air or the sky or anything, it was just complete dissolve (.) and um that because and because everyone and everything is connected, then you should take more care to think about other things and other people

Pg. 7-8, 379-383 [Participant 19]

Owen represents mushrooms as *teaching* him (providing knowledge or understanding) *that things are all connected*; a construction of magic mushrooms as imparting a sense of unity with the universe as a ‘lesson’. His use of the word *teaching* in the present tense constructs mushrooms as imparting revelation of this insight, actively providing this wisdom (implying that they act with a degree of agency). Owen constructs feeling at one with the natural world via personal dissolution (*I didn’t feel different from the trees or the ground or the air or the sky or anything*). In doing so he constructs dissolution as the mechanism by which the mushrooms impart a greater ethical awareness; that *because everyone and everything is connected then you should take more care to think about other things and other people*. This account constructs mushrooms as ‘plant-teachers’

(Tramacchi 2006); as spiritual entities which reveal ethical and environmental values by occasioning experiences of greater connection with the natural world.

Owen's account is a construction of personal revelation; he constructs the mushrooms as teaching him to be more ethical. Other participants constructed mushrooms as providing a more critical and radical sense of revelation; a revelation I am labelling 'neo-archaic truth' (McKenna 1992, 1991). The term 'neo-archaic' relates to the proposed application of ethical and cultural values, informed by modern interpretations of pre-historic and aboriginal worldviews, to contemporary Western society (McKenna 1992, 1991). This includes the promotion of psychedelics use for spiritual purposes, environmentalism, and a return to modified forms of tribalism. 'Neo-Archaism' proposes that plant based psychedelics (including magic mushrooms) enable people to connect with a set of values and way of life which is more in tune with, and respectful of, the natural world. In contrast contemporary post-industrial society is positioned as anti-spiritual, anti-natural and inadequate for humanity's needs (McKenna 1992). Constructions of this type can be seen in the extracts below from Will, who has exclusively used picked indigenous mushrooms. Here he is recounting one of his more memorable mushroom experiences (the extracts are from the same interview section, but I have omitted a digression about the difficulty of travelling when tripping):

WILL: *last time I did shrooms um, I did loads and I actually did trip this time, like fully full blown trip and it was, you know when you're watching digital TV and it goes all shitty and it sort of pixilates*

INT: *yeah*

WILL: *I kept getting that every single time like, I was just monging out basically, just zoning out, thinking about nothing kind of meditative state again I guess, and it was almost like, the whole reality was just breaking away, and underneath it was like this, this like image of the most beautiful planet I've ever seen like, it was like none of this [gestures around room] should be here and I just sort of realised like, cities are like a cancer on the earth (.) and as soon as I realised that I knew I was in the wrong place cause I was tripping in the city, and I was like nah this is not right I need to be out in the countryside, so I sort of endeavoured to go there, didn't make it came home in the end (laughs)*

Pg. 2-3, 105-114

WILL: *but yeah that realisation was enough, I didn't then need to go to the countryside cause yeah, I guess yeah, the mushrooms showed me what was, or what should be (.) rather than what we see now in front of us, rather than this meaningless crap basically people running around trying to gain possessions and money and status and power, and they just totally opened me up to that like, to the absolute fact it is bullshit*

Pg. 3, 118-122 [Participant 13]

Will constructs his experience with mushrooms as revelatory; as a *realisation* concerning contemporary life and its relationship with nature. He constructs this revelation as a dichotomy between consensus reality and a natural ideal, revealed to him by magic mushrooms as a vision (*the whole reality was just breaking away, and underneath it was ... this ...image of the most beautiful planet I've ever seen*). Will constructs the revelation of a natural ideal as positioning contemporary urban life as wrong; constructing that *none of this... should be here* (meaning urbanisation, houses, etc.). He strongly positions human habitation and post-industrial settlements as dangerous and unhealthy for the planet, constructing that *cities are like a cancer on the earth*. This is a neo-archaic construction; implied in it is that an alternative way of life more in tune with nature was (partially) revealed to him by mushrooms, in the form of a utopian vision.

Will extends his construction of a dichotomy between the contemporary urban world and a natural utopian ideal to moral and cultural values. He positions attributes typically associated with contemporary capitalist culture (*trying to gain possessions and money and status and power*) in negative terms; as *meaningless crap* and *bullshit*. He constructs this realisation about modern values as an *absolute fact*; representing opposition to them as a 'truth'. In contrast Will positions what *the mushrooms showed* him as a superior alternative; constructing it in neo-archaic terms as an idealised past (*what was*), or proposing it should be an alternative present (*or what should be*, a phrase which further positions this understanding as 'truth'). He sets this ideal yet unspecified set of values revealed by the mushroom in opposition to the falsity of *what we see now in front of us* (post-industrial cities and society).

Will attributes the neo-archaic realisation about both the environment and values to the agency of mushrooms; stating that it is what *the mushrooms showed* him and *they just totally opened [him] up* to this. His construction is not dissimilar to that of Owens; both offer a partial construction of mushrooms as revelatory 'plant-teachers' (Tramacchi 2006), but Will constructs his mushroom revelation as a more radical and critical way of looking at contemporary life.

A similar construction of magic mushrooms as revealing a superior set of social and environmental values was offered by Mark, who has used picked indigenous mushrooms for a number of years. The extract below is from an exchange initially prompted by a question about whether mushrooms can occasion spiritual experiences:

MARK: *spirituality is a realization, or a sensing and a knowing (.) of where you see yourself in the totality, and in that sense the shrooms do put you into a different place where you can look at the totality from a different angle and get your perspective on it (.) shamans have done it throughout history, South American Indians do it every race on the planet has done it since time began (.) what has happened in the UK, more so than in Europe, is the taking people away from nature, we've been taken away from the natural holistic way of looking at life to a completely manmade synthetic life and that includes values (.) when you get back to nature, and you can by taking mushrooms, you see it's not the way it's portrayed on TV, it's not the way the uh BBC says it is it's actually the opposite way (.) getting back to nature gives you that freedom, and that's the freedom of tripping*

Pg.7, 300-309 [Telephone] [Participant 21]

Mark constructs magic mushrooms as providing spiritual experiences (*spirituality is a realization ...of where you see yourself in the totality-* 'the totality' being the universe), which *put you into a different place* and by doing so provide the user with a new *perspective* on life and reality. He adds authority to this construction by positioning the use of psychedelics for spirituality as an ancient practice and a ubiquitous human endeavor (*shamans have done it throughout history ... every race on the planet has done it since time began*). Mark establishes a dichotomy between the values of a historical, shamanically informed *natural holistic* worldview and *a completely manmade synthetic life*; constructing a conspiratorial argument that the 'natural' (both physically and in terms of *values*) has been deliberately supplanted by the manmade. This construction echoes the tenets of neo-archaic philosophy. He represents *taking mushrooms* as a way to *get back to nature*; constructing mushrooms as revealing this 'lost' set of values. Mark positions this revelation as a *freedom*; a liberating insight which challenges the contemporary 'synthetic' understanding of life - *you see it's not the way it's portrayed on TV*. As such, Mark is constructing mushrooms as shamanic sacraments which enable a person to reconnect with a 'lost' set of 'natural' values and a worldview at odds with, and superior to, the contemporary 'synthetic' one. There is a counter cultural edge to Mark's construction here; implying that a conspiracy has distanced people from the 'proper' way of being. He positions mushrooms as a means of reconnecting with this understanding, constructing them as providing a critical perspective which has its roots in shamanism.

However, in this extract Mark does not directly represent mushrooms as acting with agency. Mark's construction of what magic mushrooms are still constructs them as revelatory of hidden truths; they are constructed as shamanic sacraments (or 'plant-teachers') which provide the user with a nature based, critical perspective, but the extent of their agency is less clear.

This aspect of the discourse constructs what mushrooms are as spiritual sacraments which reveal (through ‘teaching’ and ‘showing’) a critical ‘neo-archaic’ worldview. This serves to position mushrooms as revelatory and as providing (some) mushroom users with an enhanced awareness or a privileged access to a ‘truth’. It also constructs the use of mushrooms as a legitimate and worthwhile undertaking, with the implication that this could potentially provide others with the same insights.

In summary, the discourse of mushroom agency constructs magic mushrooms as spiritual entities with varying degrees of agency. They are constituted as spirits and as gods which need to be appeased, and which can decide whether to reward or punish appropriate or inappropriate use. They are also constituted as ‘teachers’ which reveal hidden truths about alternative ways of being and provide a critical perspective upon contemporary life and values, proposing a superior neo-archaic alternative. In the research encounters (some) participants using this discourse did so tentatively, or provided disclaimers that they considered this a ‘wacky’ marginal discourse. This may have been done to avoid a potentially sceptical reaction from the interviewer. However, it is constructions of scepticism, both of the ‘discourse of mushroom agency’, and the ‘discourse of naturalness’, I shall now explore.

6.3 Scepticism: Troubling the Discourses of Distinction

Whilst the above discourses constituting what magic mushrooms are may seem radically different (natural drugs and spiritual entities) they share a common feature; both construct magic mushrooms as distinct from other substances and can therefore be seen as ‘discourses of distinction’. The ‘discourse of naturalness’ constructs magic mushrooms as distinct from other substances by affording them attributes which make them superior due to their being ‘natural’. The ‘discourse of mushroom agency’ constitutes mushrooms as distinct due to their possessing a spirit and acting as plant-teachers. However, some participants offered constructions which trouble the ‘discourses of distinction’: positions of ‘scepticism’ towards the construction of magic mushrooms as in some way special due to their naturalness, or to the construction that they have agency. Firstly, scepticism of the distinction mushrooms are afforded by the ‘discourse of naturalness’.

6.3.1 ‘They’re just a drug’

The discourse of naturalness was challenged or absent in some accounts because participants constructed mushrooms as ‘just a drug’; in terms which position it as no different to other recreational substances (a similar construction to ‘Pharmacological Discourse’ in Chapter 5). In the extract below Sam explicitly rejects the construction that the naturalness of mushrooms is in some way beneficial, constructing them instead as one of a number of drugs. Sam has exclusively

consumed picked indigenous mushrooms, and is the only participant to directly challenge the 'discourse of naturalness':

INT: *so what was it about mushrooms that specifically appealed then, was it the free and natural thing*

SAM: *I think the natural thing um, I think there's plenty of natural things that can really mess you up, so I'm a bit sceptical about that, perhaps because it's free and you can get them and you can make a little bit of money out of dealing them as well which is great, people take them off your hands so easily and um, there was a period when I wasn't working and they sort of paid for my drink money, that was quite good uh (.) I think I was quite keen when I was younger to sort of experiment, um because I liked the idea of it and the fact that Acid's horrible, I've tried it a couple of times but I hate it and it's probably preferable to that (laughs)*

Pg.3, 113-121 [Participant 5]

Sam constructs his initial use of mushrooms as resulting from their availability (*it's free and you can get them*), that they can be dealt (*you can make a little bit of money out of dealing them*), and due to a desire to *sort of experiment* with psychedelics whilst disliking LSD (*Acid's horrible...and it's probably preferable to that*- the preference here being experiential, not due to a difference in how they are made/grown). As such, Sam constructs mushrooms very much as drugs, as enjoyable, as satisfying a curiosity to experiment, and as an available and saleable commodity. In Sam's account that mushrooms are 'natural' is not constructed as a positive attribute; he highlights that natural substances can be poisonous (*there's plenty of natural things that can really mess you up*). He therefore constructs himself as *a bit sceptical about* the argument or assumption that the 'naturalness' of mushrooms makes them safer or healthier to consume.

As such, Sam constructs mushrooms as a convenient and enjoyable drug; the naturalness of mushrooms does not grant them any special status as a safer alternative to other psychoactive substances that are synthesised. Several participants echoed this construction of magic mushrooms as one of a number of consumable substances which were afforded no special status as a result of being 'natural'. Instead, mushrooms were constructed as being used solely for the enjoyable effects they can occasion, and as an option within a broader drugs marketplace. A rejection of the importance of the naturalness of mushrooms can be seen in the extract below from Tim who has used legally purchased cultivated mushrooms in Europe and illegally purchased indigenous mushrooms in the UK. The extract follows an account Tim gave of the qualitative differences between LSD and mushroom experiences:

INT: *is it important that mushrooms are a fungus and LSD a chemical or is it just you know, they're just drugs*

TIM: *LSD comes from a fungus as well doesn't it*

INT: *originally yeah*

TIM: *but no it's not really important to me, I mean I always think cannabis is like, it's grown on a plant so it's like (.) I kind of thought, that was I guess comforting in a way, that it's natural but no it's not such a big thing for me I guess no (.) it's about what it does*

INT: *so did you get that same sort of comfort with mushrooms that you did with the cannabis that, it was natural*

TIM: *no I didn't really think about it to be honest*

Pg. 5-6, 238-247 [Participant 20]

Tim challenges the dichotomy between the natural and the synthetic raised by the interviewer by questioning this way of distinguishing between substances; the construction that *LSD comes from a fungus as well doesn't it* collapses this distinction and implies an equivalence between the substances in terms of their origin²⁷. Tim then constructs the distinction between natural and chemical drugs as personally unimportant to him (*no it's not really important to me ... I guess no*). He adds the caveat that he found it *comforting* that cannabis is *natural*, but does so hesitantly (*I kind of thought... I guess... in a way*) and ultimately dismisses its importance (*not such a big thing for me*). In constructing his use of psilocybin mushrooms, Tim positions this potential comfort afforded by 'naturalness' as absent; he *didn't really think about* the mushroom's status as natural. In his account Tim positions the effects of mushrooms as a drug (*it's about what it does*) as of primary importance and the potential 'naturalness' of mushrooms as not a feature informing his use.

In the above extract Tim does not utilize the 'discourse of naturalness' to construct what mushrooms are, instead he constructs them in terms of what they do; as drugs which he consumes for their effects. He does not make distinctions between mushrooms or other substances as what they are is unimportant; it is what they do that matters to him. Other participants also did not afford mushrooms any special properties or status as a result of their being 'natural'. In the extract below Alan constructs the increase he perceives in people consuming legal chemical psychedelics in festival environments, as due to the illegality of mushrooms:

²⁷ LSD was originally derived from the Ergot fungus, but since its discovery it has been chemically synthesized artificially. It is often described as a 'semi-synthetic' (Roberts 2008).

ALAN: but um the illegality of mushrooms I think is (.) something that has possibly lead to an increase in people buying manufactured stuff, um legal highs and the like, because you tend not to get I don't know, brand loyalty, you tend not to get people who just do mushrooms and if there are no mushrooms then do nothing, um you have sort of, some people are quite selective but there is an awareness of this spectrum of things that will get you to roughly the same place psychologically, and if mushrooms aren't there people will take Acid and if Acid isn't there they'll take drug y or drug z

Pg. 5, 248-253 [Participant 1]

Alan's account is a construction of the actions of others and in this construction he positions mushrooms as one of a number of drugs, divested of a special status as 'natural'. Alan constructs mushrooms as a substance which is on a *spectrum of things that will get you to roughly the same place psychologically*; positioning the psychological effects of drugs as that which motivates people to use them. This is furthered by Alan's construction that people do not tend to express *brand loyalty*: a marketing term which positions mushrooms as one of a number of purchasable options in a marketplace, and people who consume them as not strictly adherent to this 'brand'. As such, Alan does not position the 'naturalness' of mushrooms (or other substances) as being a primary facet of whether people will consume them; instead he represents a combination of wanting particular kinds of desirable psychological effects and the availability of substances which can occasion these effects, as determining what is used (*if mushrooms aren't there people will take Acid and if Acid isn't there they'll take drug y or drug z*). He does however add the caveat that *some people are quite selective*, but rejects the notion that there exist people who *just do mushrooms and if there are no mushrooms then do nothing*. Alan is however referring to drug use in a music festival context, a different recreational setting to the ones which many participants who claim to exclusively use 'natural' substances report consuming mushrooms in (typically small social gatherings of friends). This account does however construct an alternative understanding of mushrooms; 'naturalness' is not an important reason for their ingestion, attaining a particular state of consciousness is and they are merely one of a number of options for achieving this state.

The construction of mushrooms as one of a number of equivalent substances which can be obtained for a particular purpose serves to represent them as a commodity; divesting them of unique attributes and similarly offering no need to legitimize their consumption. The construction of mushrooms as a commodity challenges the special status of mushrooms as 'natural'. Whilst a 'discourse of naturalness' may serve to justify or legitimize the use of mushrooms for some participants, for others it is irrelevant- magic mushrooms are no different to any other recreational drug and their consumption is influenced only by their availability and the experiences they occasion.

6.3.2 Scepticism and Irrelevance of Mushroom Agency and Neo-Archaic Teaching

The potential marginality of the discourse of mushroom agency was previously discussed in the context of the research encounter; participants used this discourse tentatively and disclaimed that it ‘sounds wacky’. This marginality extends beyond the trepidation to endorse it in interview; few participants who did not construct mushrooms in this way made reference to it. The greater prevalence in the data set of constructions of mushrooms as drugs (either ‘natural’ or ‘just’ drugs) implies a degree of irrelevance to this construction; it is not taken seriously enough to resist or oppose. However, a minority of participants did offer specific constructions of scepticism towards mushrooms possessing agency and in doing so, drew upon a conception of magic mushrooms as one of a number of psychedelic drugs. In the extract below Simon, who has used a variety of mushroom types for hedonistic and spiritual purposes, directly undermines the discourse of mushroom agency by suggesting an alternative explanation:

INT: so coming back to the mushrooms then you mentioned earlier psilocybin mushrooms as possessing a spirit I just wondered if you’d elaborate a bit more on that

SIMON: I think so, they’ve got, there’s a feel about the experience which does lend itself to personification, there’s something about mushrooms which does lend itself to personification I think, or um, a sense of spirit, it’s very much like talking to something that is not human but is quite happy to talk to humans or something like that yeah (.) although to what extent Terrence McKenna has hypnotised us all with his delightful poetics you know, and made us all think that I don’t know (laughs) because we’re just so suggestible when on psychedelics

Pg. 6, 273-279 [Participant 6]

Simon initially constructs mushrooms as possessing *a sense of spirit*, and attributes a feeling of *personification* (as or like a conscious being) to them. He furthers this construction by elaborating that communicating with the ‘mushroom spirit’ is *very much like talking to something that is not human but is quite happy to talk to humans*, constructing it as conscious but distinct from human beings. This echoes his representation of mushrooms as possessing a spirit in the previous section ‘discourse of mushroom agency’. In both extracts he constructs mushroom spirits tentatively, retaining the possibility that it is a product of his subjectivity, rather than emanating from the mushroom (sentences such as *there’s something about mushrooms which does lend itself* holds back from entirely endorsing this position). Simon then extends this tentativeness to outright challenge the discourse of mushroom agency, casting doubt upon its origin. Drawing upon a psychological discourse of belief (similar to that used by participants in Chapter 5) he constructs the possibility that the *delightful poetics* of Terrence McKenna have *hypnotised* people into believing that mushrooms possess a spirit (*made us all think that*). McKenna advocated in several

of his books that magic mushrooms are conscious spiritual beings which can act with agency and which can be communicated with (McKenna 1991, 1992). As such, mushrooms as possessing spirits is constructed as a belief and Simon argues that it may be adopted as a result of people being *just so suggestible when on psychedelics*.

This construction enables a sceptical position to be taken upon the ‘discourse of mushroom agency’, by dismissing it as a discourse itself. Simon was the only participant to directly construct scepticism towards the construction that magic mushrooms possess a spirit. Other participants did however express scepticism to constructions around mushrooms as spiritual entities or as revealing neo-archaic truths via a sense of connection with the natural world. This scepticism can be seen in the extract below from Sam, who has exclusively consumed picked indigenous mushrooms:

INT: *so you mentioned a sort of pseudo religious experience, so do you think there is a kind of spiritual side to them*

SAM: *um I don't know, I think if you're one of these people who holds to that sort of hippie subculture, which I don't I'm very sceptical about it, but I can understand like, I'm a native to these islands, I like going out in the natural environment anyway I really enjoy it, and I do think there is that connection with it, was probably the drug of choice for our ancestors (.) um but beyond that, uh I mean I'm not convinced by the whole shamanism thing, but um (.) I went to Stonehenge once and did lots of Acid and um I guess (laughs) that's a similar sort of experience for the solstice, um yeah I'm sceptical but I can understand it*

Pg. 5, 252-260 [Participant 5]

In responding to a question as to whether there is a spiritual side to mushrooms, Sam positions himself as *very sceptical about it*. He constructs any spiritual perspective on mushrooms as part of a personal orientation to a *hippie subculture*; a mildly dismissive construction which positions conceptions of this kind as stemming from an individual's involvement in a counter-cultural lifestyle, rather than something inherent to mushrooms. Sam implicitly equates some of the tenets of neo-archaic constructions of mushrooms with this *hippie* perspective; arguing that a sense of historical legacy and natural connection is understandable (*I'm a native to these islands I like going out in the natural environment ... there is that connection with it*). However, despite associating mushrooms with *ancestors* (echoing Marks' extract on pg. 155) Sam constructs mushrooms as ‘drugs’ positioning mushrooms as the *drug of choice* for people of the past. This affords mushrooms no special spiritual status or sense of agency or revelation, they are still ‘just drugs’ but drugs which have a historical legacy. Sam furthers his construction of dismissing anything *beyond* a historical use of mushrooms as drugs by expressing further scepticism at *the whole shamanism thing*; implying that he does not see it as a spiritual or significant endeavour. He constructs his own

recreational use of a psychedelic at a sacred site on a significant date (*I went to Stonehenge once and did lots of Acid...for the solstice*) as a similar sort of experience to that of the ancestors, reaffirming that even in sacred contexts drugs are fun but nothing more. Sam does not however entirely shut down the possibility of a spiritual understanding of mushrooms, stating that he can *understand it*.

Sam's account maintains the construction that mushrooms are 'just drugs' and uses this position to explain his 'scepticism' of more spiritual, neo-archaic and (by implication) shamanic conceptions of what mushrooms are. Whilst this construction does not directly address mushroom agency, by constructing mushrooms as drugs and dismissing the contexts and constructions which inform a 'discourse of mushroom agency', Sam positions this as implausible and marginal to him, as something evoking scepticism unless one is a *hippie*.

An extract from the interview with Wendy below further rejects the notion of magic mushrooms as linked to natural revelation or connection with nature spirituality by way of associating them with 'hippies'. Here I directly introduce the notion that mushrooms can enable a sense of connection with the natural world (an aspect of neo-archaic constructions):

INT: *have you felt any connection with nature as a result of taking mushrooms or has that not been your experience*

WENDY: *no (.) no I was going to say that I actually feel that more with salvia than with mushrooms, but no it wasn't it was just like entertainment (.) cause I even went to like this hippie farm down on the South East coast for a winter solstice, and the whole idea was everyone was taking mushrooms to have this collective experience, and again it was like it was fun it was I don't know, I enjoyed it but it wasn't I think other people were a lot more into that side of it than I was, not only connection with other people but with nature like we all went for walks and stuff like that all together and we were like walking barefoot and things like that and I just again, I was I'm enjoying being high but not feeling what some of those hippies are (.) but maybe you have to, I've always thought maybe like you get out what you put in if you see what I mean (.) if I'd been more into that side of it I probably would have felt it more but I wasn't it was just well fun*

Pg. 8, 378-392 [Participant 15]

Wendy represents her experiences with mushrooms as not providing a connection with nature, a construction which contradicts those participants who construct mushrooms as plant-teachers. Instead she positions them as enjoyable recreational drugs providing *entertainment, fun* and an enjoyment of *being high*. She uses the example of going to a *hippie* (implying an affinity for nature and a spiritual worldview) nature retreat to illustrate how a spiritual natural experience (*the whole*

idea was everyone was taking mushrooms to have this collective experience) is outside of her interest. She constructs others as *a lot more into that side of it*; experiencing *connection with other people* and *with nature* at a time of potentially spiritual significance (*a winter solstice*). However, she constructs a spiritual experience of natural connection as a result of inclination and desire (*I'm enjoying being high but not feeling what some of those hippies are*), and positioning herself as just enjoying the experiences of intoxication. In this regard she constructs mushrooms as having the potential to enable connective experiences between others and nature (a construction advocated by Owen in this chapter, pg. 152), which may be spiritual, but positions this as a choice on the part of the user, as something you have to 'be into'. Wendy's more recreational approach to mushroom use constructs them as a drug, and affords doing this 'natural' substance in a spiritualised and 'natural' setting as offering no special effects or properties beyond this.

In summary, scepticism challenges the discourses of distinction by constructing magic mushrooms as 'just drugs'. The *discourse of naturalness* is challenged by constructing the 'naturalness' of magic mushrooms as mundane; as not providing them with any special properties which make mushrooms more appropriate to consume than other substances. Instead, mushrooms are constructed as one recreational substance amongst many, taken for their pleasurable effects and as in no way more reassuring to consume due to their 'naturalness'. Similarly, the *discourse of mushroom agency* is challenged by construction of mushrooms as recreational drugs. Magic mushrooms as spirits or as revealing neo-archaic truth is represented as a marginal belief chosen by people who adhere to a natural-spiritual worldview; namely 'hippies'. This worldview is represented as something certain people 'are into', but which evokes scepticism if you are not. As such, mushroom agency is a marginal discourse, further evidenced by how minority a construction it was in the data set.

6.4 Summary: Chapter 6: What Magic Mushrooms Are

In this chapter I explored how participants constitute magic mushrooms as experiential objects; how meaning is made of what they are. Two principal discourses were identified in participants talk. Firstly, a *discourse of naturalness* which constitutes magic mushrooms a distinct type of substance due their status as 'natural products', and which serves to legitimise and justify their use. This status was constructed through a dichotomy of *natural vs. manmade drugs*; with mushrooms represented as safer and more desirable to consume due to their 'naturalness'. 'Naturalness' was further constructed through evolutionary discourses, mobilised to construct equivalence between humans and fungi as part of the same biological web of being. Participants therefore argued that *it's natural to take mushrooms* because they, and we, are both products of the same 'natural world'. This construction was also mobilised to argue against the current scheduled status of psilocybin mushrooms, with participants constructing that *it's wrong to make nature illegal*.

The second discourse identified was a '*discourse of mushroom agency*' which enables construction of mushrooms as sentient supernatural beings: represented as *mushroom spirits* (the mushroom itself is a being with agency) and *mushroom gods* (minor deities watch over magic mushrooms and who need to be appeased). These beings were represented as possessing agency and the power to punish (with 'bad trips' and no trips) those who do not approach mushrooms with reverence and respect. Participants expressed awareness of the marginality of this construction, presenting it tentatively in the research encounter. Magic mushrooms were also constructed as *teachers of neo-archaic truth*; as providing a critical perspective on contemporary life and values by revealing radical environmental 'truths' about humanities relationship with nature and ethics.

Both of these discourses construct magic mushrooms as in some way distinct and superior to other psychoactive substances. As such, participants also provided accounts of *scepticism* towards these discourses, constructing magic mushrooms as 'just drugs' which are not afforded any special properties due to their status as a 'natural product'. They also constructed mushroom agency as a marginal discourse which is something that people choose to believe in. Recreational constructions of mushrooms as drugs for fun troubled the idea that they are spirits, gods or teachers and this notion was instead cast (in non-pejorative terms) as a belief for 'hippies'.

In the next chapter I shall further explore constructions of fun and spirituality by engaging with respondents' accounts of what magic mushrooms are for; their function and why they are, or should be, used.

Chapter 7: What Magic Mushrooms Are For: Recreation or Spiritual Improvement

In exploring the construction of meanings associated with magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion it is necessary to consider users' constructions of purpose; what mushrooms are for and why they are and should be taken. Two distinct and predominant discourses arose from the data set concerning purpose and use (what mushrooms are for). The first is a *recreational discourse* where mushrooms are constructed as recreational drugs taken for the purposes of enjoyment, entertainment and escapism- constituting them as 'for fun'. The second is a *neo-spiritual discourse* which enables construction of mushrooms as spiritual tools, facilitating introspection and taken for purposes of personal development and self-improvement. This neo-spiritual discourse serves to legitimise magic mushroom consumption by constructing spiritual use as appropriate use, disavowing and dismissing recreational reasons for consuming magic mushrooms²⁸.

These discourses do not constitute the whole or only reasons participants provided for taking magic mushrooms. Participants also negotiated *the relationship between the discourses*, providing constructions around the dichotomy of recreational and spiritual use, occasionally synthesising these two approaches to what mushrooms are for but seldom doing so comfortably. Participants also used an additional discourse beyond the spiritual and recreational dichotomy in constituting what mushrooms are for; an older discourse with links to the psychedelic era which constructs mushrooms as for occasioning experiences of *value and transformation*. Firstly, I shall explore constructions of magic mushrooms as for fun and recreation

7.1 Recreational Discourse

This discourse enables participants to construct magic mushrooms as recreational drugs, consumed during leisure times and in leisure spaces for the purposes of novelty, hedonism and sociability. Mushrooms are represented as enabling entertaining and diverting experiences for personal amusement or to enhance a social occasion. This is a fairly 'common sense' discourse, encapsulating the fun elements of consuming hallucinogens for enjoyment; representing them as similar yet distinct to other substances that are also categorised as 'recreational drugs'.

²⁸ In the current thesis participants constructed recreational and spiritual magic mushroom use dichotomously. Other critical drug research argues that recreational activities in commercial spaces associated with drug use and electronic dance music (EDM) constitute a form of alternative spiritual expression and participation, and as such recreation and spirituality are intertwined (see Moore 2010). Whilst I acknowledge the argument that the spiritual and recreational are not easily disentangled in the context of drug use leisure practices and in broader capitalist consumer culture (e.g. experiential tourism), I have taken my lead from participants and as such represent and analyse this constructed dichotomy between 'the spiritual' and 'the recreational' as present in their accounts.

7.1.1 Magic Mushroom Experiences as ‘Fun’

Exploring constructions of mushrooms as recreational first requires a consideration of how the experiences they occasion are represented as enjoyable or ‘fun’. Broadly, participants constructed magic mushroom experiences as fun in one (or a combination) of two ways: that mushrooms provide strange and entertaining experiences (novelty), and/or that mushrooms provide feelings of euphoria which enhance a social occasion (hedonism). A construction of fun as novelty can be seen in the extract below from Alice. Alice seasonally consumes large doses of picked indigenous mushrooms and here recounts a recent experience she had with her partner.

ALICE: I just like drugs, I just like to feel different (.) pills are great but mushrooms are like, I just really like hallucinating really, like visuals are just wicked, like this last time we took them and went out for a walk I was laughing all the way back, and we got in and it felt like, you know when you go to a funhouse or like, when you see in movies when the corridor is at a slant like an optical illusion, it was like that, we walked in and everything had gone weird like Alice in Wonderland or something, it was just really cool (laughs) I was like yeeey things are really weird, awesome

Pg. 6, 307-312 [Participant 3]

Alice represents herself as someone who enjoys novel subjective experiences (*I just like to feel different*) and provides this as the reason why she *likes drugs*. As such, she constructs mushrooms as drugs which are entertaining and fun because of the kind of subjective experiences they enable; primarily the perceptual aspects of tripping. For Alice it is the hallucinatory potential of mushrooms which makes them enjoyable and differentiates them from other *great* (pleasurable) recreational substances (namely *pills*- ecstasy based tablets). She states that she *just really likes hallucinating*, which she repeatedly constructs as entertaining (that things look *really cool* and are *wicked*). Alice represents hallucinating as inherently enjoyable because of its weirdness and novelty; she does this via metaphor likening the appearance of the world when on mushrooms to *Alice in Wonderland* (implying bizarreness), exclaiming that this weirdness is pleasing (*yeeey things are really weird*). It is important to note that Alice’s construction of fun is not only what she sees, but also how mushrooms pleasurably distort her sense of what is *felt*. This construction emphasises novel experience; it is what the mushrooms enable visually and experientially that appeals to Alice and what makes them ‘fun’.

A slightly different hedonistic account of fun can be seen in the extract below from Tim, who has bought and consumed cultivated and indigenous mushrooms on European holidays and at a music festival. This extract follows a recounting of his most memorable experiences.

INT: *you said you had a good experience your first time in Amsterdam*

TIM: *yeah I just felt really really happy (laughs) and uh, everything was like very funny as well, hilarious like constantly like hysterical laughter (.) the second time as well was really euphoric and sort of just, everything was funny and just like happy, the second time we were just sat in like a pub in Prague but it was, in retrospect, objectively, it was quite boring just to be sat there but it just seemed like the most fun thing ever*

Pg. 2, 67-72 [Participant 20]

Tim constructs enjoyable experiences with mushrooms as a form of somatic euphoria, representing pleasurable feelings as fun. He does this through repeated references to hilarity and laughter, feeling *really really happy* and explicitly stating he felt *really euphoric*. Tim uses these positive adjectives to constitute himself as feeling a sense of joy and well-being as a result of taking mushrooms. He then represents these pleasurable alterations to subjective experience as adding to fun in a social setting with friends (*sat in like a pub in Prague*). As such, he constructs mushrooms as able to transform a *quite boring* event into *the most fun thing ever* (a strong construction emphasizing pleasure and hedonism). The avoidance of boredom is an inherent part of recreation and here Tim constructs mushrooms as exactly for this purpose; they render the *objectively* dull into something enjoyable because of the fun experiences they occasion.

Whilst Alice and Tim offer differing constructions of enjoyment (novel experience and hedonism), they are not mutually exclusive; many participants constructed combinations of euphoria and novel experience in their accounts of what makes mushrooms fun. The above extracts construct fun as emanating from the trippy and euphoric sensations occasioned by mushrooms (typically considered a product of their ‘effects’). It is important to remember that the constructions of these effects as pleasurable, is one of numerous possible constructions of meaning around the subjective effects psilocybin mushrooms can occasion (Letcher 2007). For example, in the 19th Century the experiences occasioned by psilocybin mushrooms were constructed as frightening indicators of poisoning, an understanding which changed with the advent of recreational psychedelic drug discourses in the 1950s (Letcher 2007). Similarly, a Mazatec shaman is unlikely to construct his divinatory experiences with psilocybin mushrooms as ‘fun’ (Letcher 2006, Langlitz 2010) Whilst mushrooms may possess a physical potentiality to occasion enjoyable experiences via their chemical action, in order to do so these experiences need to be understood as ‘fun’, which requires a discursive construction of mushrooms as recreational drugs (see Chapter 3 Theoretical Considerations for a more detailed explanation). As such, I wish to reiterate that in order for mushrooms to be constructed as recreational, the experiences they occasion have to be discursively understood as desirable and ‘fun’ in order to be experienced and constructed as such.

7.1.2 Entertainment and Shared Experience

Having established how mushroom experiences are constructed as intrinsically fun, I shall now explore how mushrooms are employed as recreational agents; as providing entertainment in a leisure context and a shared sense of enjoyment at a social event. Entertainment is constructed as the primary motive for use in the extract below from Wendy, who has consumed purchased cultivated mushrooms and picked indigenous mushroom over a number of years. In this extract she is recounting her early experiences with cultivated mushrooms purchased during the period of legal tolerance and sale in Britain 2002-2005:

WENDY: *there was a new age shop or head shop in a high street a walk-able distance from my flat, and I'd just go get them there so yeah it's like, it's Saturday what shall we do (.) so it was like literally it was always something to do instead of just going out or, if I was going out it just made it more fun more interesting always more fun than getting drunk, I'd rather have got high than drunk*

INT: *why's that*

WENDY: *it's just always more fun, I like um I like the experience of like playing about with your brain, like alcohol you just get drunk, maybe you get a bit giggly but alcohol tends to just numb you, um whereas mushrooms was just always a bit different always more fun like, seeing little dancing tribal men I remember just sitting there and watching them for ages because it was fun, it was like that's kind of quirky I'm enjoying that (.) it's just playing about with your brain it's this sense of my brain can do that like that's a bit weird*

Pg. 1, 30-41 [Participant 15]

Wendy repeatedly constructs magic mushroom experiences as *fun*; as intrinsically enjoyable. She represents this as due to the quirkiness and novelty of the experiences and hallucinations they occasion. Wendy constructs this novelty as psychological in origin; mushrooms enable you to *play about with your brain*; the word 'play' constructs this as light-hearted and entertaining. As a result of mushrooms' ability to occasion novel enjoyable experiences, Wendy constructs taking mushrooms as a form of entertainment; as *literally something to do* with leisure time for its own sake, or as a way of making *going out* (to a nightclub) *more fun more interesting*. In the context of a night out she represents mushrooms as an entertaining intoxicant through a comparison with alcohol. Alcohol is evoked as a substance used for similar purposes of enhancing leisure time, or for the enjoyable effects of drunkenness, but which Wendy places as inferior in terms of the fun it occasions (*I'd rather have got high than drunk*). Alcohol is represented as enabling less engaging

experiences; *you just get drunk* ('just' implying lesser) which is 'numbing', unlike mushrooms which are vibrant, '*weird*' and '*quirky*'.

Wendy constructs mushrooms as a suitable recreational drug because they are a purchasable substance which can occasion quirky and novel experiences; experiences which are intrinsically entertaining or which can enhance a leisure activity. Wendy's account is evocative of other 'typical' consumptive weekend leisure activities; the image she creates of purchasing mushrooms at a head shop is not dissimilar to renting a DVD, or visiting an off-licence. Wendy's account concerns mushrooms bought during a period of legal tolerance and sale in Britain (2002-2005). Other participants also constructed using mushrooms obtained after their reclassification as an illegal substance for entertainment; to enhance activities such as listening to music, for fun in leisure spaces such as nightclubs and music festivals, and for the enjoyment of tripping for its own sake (for an example see the extract from Alice above). However, the commodity aspects of Wendy's construction are affected by mushrooms being legally purchasable at this time.

Although ostensibly about fun in a leisure context Wendy's account is largely subjective; it is focused upon the novelty of her sensations and hallucinations as fun. Participants also constructed mushrooms as primarily social; as recreational drugs that can create a shared sense of novelty in group contexts. In the extract below Julie, whose use of mushrooms is primarily picked indigenous varieties, exemplifies this construction of shared social experience.

INT: so was it mainly a party and festival drug or did you do it on your own

JULIE: don't think I ever did it on my own, I always did it in small groups at parties and we used to take some to festivals and yeah that sort of thing, but never on my own no

INT: OK always a sociable thing

JULIE: yeah it was always a social drug, it always created something very interesting (laughs) you know people react differently to them and you can react differently to them depending on the situation (.) I never had a really bad time, I didn't feel the terrors (.) um I didn't really have massive like hallucinations or anything I mean obviously things brightened but um, some people had the terrors and some would just uh, go off on a bizarre tangent behaving sort of, maybe start talking to imaginary friends, examining their hands for ages (laughs) things like that, but um it's a good talking point, we always had really good humour with it, creates a sort of shared experience

Pg. 1, 30-40 [Skype] [Participant 7]

Julie constructs her use of mushrooms as exclusively recreational and sociable; as *always* taken in leisure spaces such as *parties and festivals* and consumed *in small groups (never on [her] own)*. She constructs this recreational mushroom use as primarily social and shared; she emphasises other

people's mushroom induced *bizarre tangents* and behaviours (e.g. *talking to imaginary friends*) as that which generates novelty and enjoyable intrigue. As such, Julie constructs an image of an event where people interact with each other's mushroom induced weirdness, where the collective experience of strangeness and interaction is what *creates a shared experience*. Julie represents some people's experiences as occasionally negative (*some people had the terrors*), but constructs this as unproblematic. She implies that even negative experiences when shared as a group were still interesting. That these experiences are fun and novel is constructed by Julie through her representation of them as *a good talking point* (implying novelty- there is much to discuss after the event) and that her group of friends *always had really good humour with it*; implying it was funny and enjoyable.

Julie's account emphasises a social recreational use of mushrooms and other participants shared this construction. Recreational use in this context is always in a group for the purposes of adding to the fun of time with friends by creating a novel shared experience. In both Wendy and Julie's accounts mushrooms are positioned as recreational through their construction as devices for enhancing leisure times and places; enabling enjoyable subjective or collective experiences which add to a social context or event.

7.1.3 Recreation and Escapism

A related but different construction of mushrooms as entertaining is that they provide an enjoyable means of escapism. This construction of mushrooms is evident in the following extract from Sam, who has exclusively consumed picked indigenous mushrooms:

INT: *so recapping it's the enjoyment factor with mushrooms*

SAM: *yeah the escapism um (.) yeah I think it is sort of like going somewhere, like it is a trip, you do sort of leave your day to day life behind you, and then wander off, lose yourself in a beautiful place um with some good friends, and then kind of come back and pick up where you left off (.) it can add an extra dimension to things you know, rather than just being bored, I mean it can be an event itself if you plan it properly and you get the right number of people the right activity, creates that sense of an event which is nice*

Pg. 6, 274-280 [Participant 5]

Sam constructs mushrooms as recreational in similar terms to the extracts cited above; the experiences mushrooms can occasion can enhance (*add an extra dimension to*) social events, or can act as an *event itself*. Also he constructs mushrooms as alleviating boredom (similar to Tim); as providing an entertaining experience beyond whatever leisure event is undertaken (*rather than just being bored*), and as creating shared social experience.

However, Sam is more explicit than other participants in his construction of mushrooms as 'recreational'; if recreation is taken to mean a restorative and amusing use of discretionary time outside of 'work' (work being time spent engaged in economic activity) (Rojeck 1995). Sam constructs magic mushroom experiences as providing temporary *escapism* from your *day to day life*; as providing an experiential diversion which allows you to 'escape' contemporary social 'reality', presumably work, study or equivalent 'productive' activity. He constructs taking mushrooms in similar terms to taking a holiday, as providing a transient, enjoyable break; a trip in a subjective experiential sense (*it is sort of like going somewhere*) rather than a literal geographical one. Sam constructs this break as temporary and restorative, once the mushroom trip and related leisure is over you *come back and pick up where you left off* with everyday life. In this regard Sam's construction of mushroom use is virtually a definition of recreation; they provide a subjective vacation which does not produce any lasting change or impact in the consumer. Sam constructs mushrooms as a fairly mundane leisure activity, akin to other things that people can do with their leisure time and recreation.

In summary, recreational discourse constitutes mushrooms as drugs which provide intrinsically entertaining or novel experiences, which enhance or generate interesting and fun social occasions and which provide respite and vacation from 'everyday life', much like other leisure pursuits. Mushrooms are represented as ideal recreational agents to be consumed in leisure times and spaces for purposes of enjoyment. This construction of magic mushrooms as for fun was constructed by some participants as at odds with other understandings of mushrooms as agents of spiritual/psychological change and insight (Letcher 2007), something I shall explore in the next section.

7.2 Work: Neo-Spiritual Discourse

This discourse enables participants to construct magic mushrooms as devices for 'doing work' upon the self, in contrast to them being 'for fun' and recreation. In constructing mushrooms as a means of doing work upon the self, participants primarily represented them as 'spiritual tools' which enable or enhance self-exploration, personal-development and seeking enlightenment. It is important to note that the concept 'spiritual' in the context of this discourse has a specific meaning. Rather than relating to a more 'traditional' understanding of the spiritual as esoteric (associated with divinity, non-corporeal souls, metaphysical entities etc.), the concept of spiritual within this discourse is linked to New Ageism and its association with the neo-liberal self-project (Rimke 2000, Redden 2002). This perspective constitutes spirituality as referring to matters of morality, mind and inner life; constructed in (pseudo) psychological terms and relating spirituality to self-improvement and self-exploration (Rimke 2000). As such, I refer to this discourse and associated constructions as 'neo-spiritual'.

By labelling this discourse as ‘neo-spiritual’, I hope to distinguish it from a ‘traditional’ understanding of esoteric and theological spirituality. However, in order to encompass the multiple aspects of the discourses pertinent to ‘work’ and spirituality I have taken my interpretative lead from the participants, including data where they construct their use and experiences as ‘spiritual’ yet related to self-improvement, which sometimes blurs the lines between the ‘neo-spiritual’ and the esoteric spiritual. In all the following extracts mushrooms are constructed as for the completion of ‘spiritual work’ and are juxtaposed with recreational discourse.

7.2.1 Neo-Spiritual Tools

In the extract below Victor, who has purchased cultivated and indigenous mushrooms, and used them in festival contexts and on his own, constructs magic mushrooms as ‘tools’ which enable the work of spiritual personal development. This extract follows an elaboration of what Victor finds appealing about mushrooms:

VICTOR: *mushrooms and LSD can be tools to help you see what's spiritual, what's beautiful, some people don't need them but for others they help you to see what's beautiful in life or what's beautiful in them (.) because that's important too, that you consider yourself as something what's worthy, something what you want to treasure (.) I think people have to start thinking about themselves as like a project, you know, it's you, that's the biggest project you will ever have in your life, like just try to get the best out of it, and I think mushrooms and meditation can help you, they're tools you can aid your personal-development with*

INT: *OK, are they also fun*

VICTOR: *I would say so yes, but that depends on what your expectations are and how you take them, of course if you want to have some and if you sit down yeah probably (.) but actually they're not fun for me, no they're not fun they're more self-exploration, instead of fun they are self-explorations*

Pg. 7-8, 329-339 [Participant 10]

Victor constructs mushrooms as *tools*; as devices for aiding *spiritual* ‘work’ which he relates to an appreciation of beauty (profundity) and *personal-development*. By associating spirituality with personal-development Victor constructs spirituality in neo-liberal terms; representing it as the undertaking of a self- *project* wherein the goal is to become *something what's worthy*. He categorises mushrooms as a technology (along with LSD and meditation) which may *aid* a person in their undertaking of this self-project. He constructs self-improvement as *important*; as something *people have to* undertake as this is the *biggest project you will ever have*. These constructions underpin the significance Victor attaches to this undertaking; it is a serious and difficult goal based enterprise and he asserts that the use of *mushrooms* makes this ‘work’ easier. However, whilst

mushrooms are one of a number of assistive technologies Victor does not represent them as essential to personal improvement; constructing that *some people don't need them* to achieve a self that is spiritually aware. This foregrounds the self-project as significant and important: taking mushrooms is merely an aid to this undertaking, not of intrinsic value in itself.

In response to Victor's construction that mushrooms are neo-spiritual tools, I introduce recreational discourse to explore if there is another dimension to mushrooms (*are they also fun*). Victor initially agrees and begins to construct mushrooms as fun, but then abandons this to reiterate the position that mushrooms are for *self-exploration* (a construction similar to personal-development). In doing so he (re)produces a dichotomy where mushrooms are either for 'fun' or for 'self-exploration'; rejecting the possibility that they can be both by definitively stating that *they're not fun*.

The rapid discursive shift Victor makes from his initial agreement that they can be fun, to rejection and reinforcement that mushrooms are only for self-exploration reflects his engagement with mushrooms. In providing a biographical account of his use in the interview Victor stated that he did not initially consume them for the spiritual purposes he constructs as appropriate (initially having consumed mushrooms for recreational purposes at music festivals). This shift in his response is indicative of the legitimising function of neo-spiritual discourse; the use of mushrooms (as a drug) is only acceptable if it is undertaken for the worthwhile end of productive self-improvement. As such, many participants constructed neo-spiritual use in opposition to recreational use; denigrating the use of mushrooms for fun as unproductive. It is this legitimising function I shall now explore.

7.2.2 'Neo-Spiritual' Use is 'Appropriate Use':

In utilising neo-spiritual discourse in their constructions of what mushrooms are for participants establish an opposition between spiritual discourse and recreational discourse. In doing so, they position mushroom consumption for self-improvement purposes as 'appropriate use' and recreational use as inferior or wrong²⁹. This can be seen in the extracts below where Erica, who has used cultivated mushrooms in small social groups, responds to a question about her 'spiritual' use (first extract) and in the second extract to a question asking if mushrooms are an appropriate party drug:

²⁹ In the current data set participants divided appropriate and inappropriate use along neo-spiritual/recreational lines, rather than the more typical division of 'restrained recreational and unrestrained problematic' use (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010) or 'use and abuse' (Rødner 2005). Whilst I am led by the data in this thesis, it is important to note that the division of appropriate and inappropriate drug use along lines of recreational use and problematic abuse informs meaning making practices in the wider field of drug studies and in government policy and recovery services (O'Malley 2002).

INT: *when you say it's spiritual, is it that psychedelics allow you to experience something more*

ERICA: *I think it's, yeah, I think it is possible with other techniques such as meditation, I think you can get to that spot without using drugs but, um, I definitely think they help, and I definitely think they should be used responsibly, I mean you get some idiot children who [adopts stereotypical 'stoner' accent] 'yeah let's go do some drugs', I don't think that's really worthwhile for them, because they are not looking at it to sort of ,enhance themselves, they are just looking at it like as recreational let's have a good time, let's get wasted, and I don't think that's what they are for*

Pg. 2, 52-63

ERICA: *it is an experience that like (.) I don't think (.) it's not something you can do every other weekend or every weekend you know, for me it's very profound (.) so I wouldn't use them like that, I suppose I am using them recreationally, but you know what I mean the difference between recreationally as in let's get fucked up, and recreationally as in let's take some time out and use these drugs, mushrooms (.) explore myself*

Pg. 6, 255-260 [Participant 17]

Erica constructs mushrooms as a spiritual tool; as one of several *techniques* which can *definitely help* with spiritual and personal development. In constructing mushrooms as a spiritual tool Erica positions this use of mushrooms as 'appropriate' use; as how mushrooms *should be used*. Integral to this position is the establishment of a dichotomy with recreational use, which is dismissed as not using them *responsibly* and as illegitimate. Erica does this by constructing a negative image of *idiot children* (a pejorative, implying stupidity and immaturity) who consume mushrooms solely for the *recreational* purposes of having a *good time* and getting *wasted* ('wasted' indicating intoxication; abuse rather than use). In contrast, Erica establishes that what mushrooms 'should' be used for is the *worthwhile* undertaking of self-improvement; people should be *looking to ... enhance themselves* with mushrooms. Having fun or a good time with mushrooms is positioned as valueless; represented as not *what they are for*. In establishing this spiritual/recreational dichotomy Erica is legitimizing a particular understanding of mushrooms; the use of them as neo-spiritual tools is acceptable because it is allied with self-improvement, whereas 'mindless hedonism' is disavowed because it is unproductive. This is a construction which echoes the neo-liberal ideology informing this discourse.

However, when confronted with a discourse of fun (I asked if mushrooms can be a party drug), Erica constructs her own use of mushrooms as recreational and engages in a careful discursive negotiation to define and legitimize her use. This is to avoid endorsing the kind of hedonism she

previously undermined and to also avoid dismissing her own use of mushrooms. In order to legitimize her 'recreational' use she recasts the spiritual/recreational, appropriate/inappropriate dichotomy as a distinction between types of 'recreation'. She maintains the position that hedonistic 'for fun' use is illegitimate; *let's get fucked up* constructs this use as uninhibited and for the purposes of delirious intoxication. In contrast she constructs 'responsible' recreational use for the purposes of self-exploration and development (taking *some time out*) as legitimate and productive. That she maintains this policing of 'appropriate use' within the context of a recreational construction suggests that the legitimacy in using magic mushrooms has more to do with rejecting hedonistic fun and promoting a neo-liberal concept of acceptable drug use (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010, O'Malley 2002), than it does in defining spiritual use.

A similar negation of recreation and a positioning of spiritual use as appropriate use can be seen in the extract below from Karl, who has used purchased cultivated truffles in the Netherlands. This extract follows his account of an experience with a large dose of truffles:

KARL: *I think they should be taken under fairly controlled scenarios, not at like a hard-core rave, where everyone's off their faces on speed and coke or whatever, and alcohol, it's not the sort of environment that you'd want to be taking these things you know, you want something relaxed um, as far as I'm concerned it's more of a spiritual sort of inner journey*

INT: *do you think they could be a party drug at all*

KARL: *no, not as far as I'm concerned, well it depends what parties you are talking about, if you are just there with your two best mates then yeah sure, but not in a club or anything, I can think of few worse places, because I don't think that, the thing I see beneficial about this is again for insightfulness, and looking into yourself, and thinking how do I perceive the world, and what am I in relation to the world (.) if you are just concentrating on the walls are melting on me, then you just don't get that*

Pg. 7-8, 334-344 [Participant 22]

Karl constructs mushrooms as for spiritual introspection. He represents the experiences they occasion as an *inner journey*, and constructs *looking into yourself* and considering one's perception of and relation to *the world* as what mushrooms are for. Karl establishes this spiritual construction as appropriate use by positioning it in opposition to recreational use. He does so by constructing leisure contexts typically associated with hedonistic recreational substance use (*a hard-core rave* and *a club*), as the wrong *sort of environment* for *taking* mushrooms: as the *few worse places* you could do them, a strong rejection of these contexts as appropriate. Karl reinforces this construction by caricaturing raves as situations of wanton poly drug intoxication (*where everyone's off their faces on speed and coke ... and alcohol*) which are chaotic and overtly hedonistic. Karl's dismissal

of recreational use stems from the argument that a person cannot engage in the introspective ‘work’ of the spiritual if they are in a context suited to the hedonistic, as he positions a *relaxed* and *fairly controlled scenario* as necessary for introspection. Furthermore, Karl argues that if someone is preoccupied with the novel and entertaining aspects of mushroom experience, they are also not engaged in appropriate use; *if you are just concentrating on the walls are melting on me* (an enjoyment of the visual aspects of tripping, echoing Wendy and Alice’s constructions of fun), *then you just don’t get* spiritual insight. Karl therefore constructs the recreational use of mushrooms as unproductive and inappropriate, people ‘should’ be using them for the *beneficial* effects of *insightfulness* that they can occasion.

The constructions of spiritual use as appropriate use in both Karl and Erica’s accounts above position the recreational use of mushrooms as inappropriate, but they do not negate the possibility that mushrooms can be used in this way- it is just that to do so is positioned as wasteful and lacking in the potential for personal insight. In the extract below, Will, who has consumed large doses of picked indigenous mushrooms on several occasions, offers a more prosaic account as to why a recreational use of mushrooms is inappropriate:

INT: *so what do you make of the idea that they can be a party drug*

WILL: *I suppose it could be a party drug, I wouldn’t say a very good one to be honest, if you want a party drug you should go for LSD or MDMA some of the 2Ci family, they’re quite good party drugs, but I don’t rate mushrooms as a party drug to be honest, it isn’t very giggly um yeah no I don’t rate it for that, not at all*

INT: *OK*

WILL: *I think the proper way to use it is to be uh, with the intention of spiritual awakening (.) like the ritual way of doing it (.) I think that’s the proper way it should be used, the age old way it has been used (.) it’s all about self-exploration that’s where it’s at man, cause you know like it’s all within isn’t it all the answers are within like (.) your body’s a universe to something’s isn’t it, so who’s to say the universe isn’t alive, I’m convinced that mother earth is alive*

Pg. 6, 287-298 [Participant 13]

Will represents the rejection of a recreational use of mushrooms as more practical and less moralistic than the participants above. He just does not *rate mushrooms as a party drug* compared to other substances which have more appropriate subjective effects. His emphatic rejection of mushrooms as hedonistic (*it isn’t very giggly ... no I don’t rate it for that, not at all*) is at odds with constructions from other participants of mushrooms as subjectively fun (e.g. Alice and Tim). That Will can take the same substance as others but find it to be unsatisfying as a recreational drug,

offers some indication of the importance of both context and discourse in mushroom experiences, a point I shall go on to address in the discussion chapter.

Despite rejecting mushrooms as a party drug for prosaic reasons, Will still draws upon an oppositional dichotomy between the spiritual and the recreational, positioning spiritual use as appropriate. He constructs the use of magic mushrooms for *spiritual awakening* as the *proper way to use* them, as how they *should be used* (strongly constructing this as what they are for). Will is constructing a similar account to the participants above; (re)producing opposition between the spiritual and recreational and positioning mushrooms as a substance which ‘ought’ to be taken for spiritual purposes. Will’s construction of what constitutes the spiritual though is more nebulous than previous participants. His association of ‘spiritual awakening’ with *self-exploration* and introspection or inner journey (*all the answers are within*) has shades of the self-improvement constructions other participants have offered. The association is that a neo-spiritual undertaking requires introspection, and mushrooms enable this. However, Will also introduces concepts more akin to traditional esoteric spirituality (as seen in the section ‘Parallel-reality discourse’ in Chapter 5: What Mushrooms Do); implying a link between the self (or more specifically the body) the universe and ‘mother earth’ (a deification of nature). Furthermore, he makes associations of spiritual mushroom use with *ritual* and a construction of historical legacy (*the age old way it has been used*). In this respect (and indeed across the transcript of Will’s interview) the construction of the spiritual cannot be said to be exclusively linked to self-improvement and the self-project, but instead possesses elements of neo-shamanism as advocated by certain writers of psychedelic literature (McKenna 1992, Castaneda 1969). In spite of this more nebulous conception of spirituality, I argue that the similarities between Will’s account and those of other participants in this section are indicative of the constructions enabled by neo-spiritual discourse. His construction maintains opposition between recreation and spirituality, positions spiritual use as appropriate use, and constructs the ‘spiritual work’ undertaken with mushrooms as (at least in part) concerned with self-exploration and inner journey.

In summary, neo-spiritual discourse allowed participants to construct magic mushrooms as tools to be used for personal development, self-exploration and for ‘spiritual awakening’. In constructing mushrooms in this way, recreational use was positioned as oppositional to spiritual use and constructed as illegitimate because it does not involve the ‘work’ of personal development. As such, this discourse is elitist and seeks to legitimise a particular understanding of mushroom use, by representing it as a technology which can be used to aid the neo-liberal constitution of the self as project.

7.3 The Relationship Between the Discourses of Recreation and Spirituality

Having established and detailed the discourses of recreation and spirituality in the context of users constructions of what magic mushrooms are for, I shall now explore instances in participants' talk where they negotiated the relationship between these discourses. Firstly, I shall explore instances where I introduced spiritual discourse to participants who constructed their mushroom use as primarily recreational. Secondly, I explore tensions between, and synthesis of, these discourses in participants' accounts.

7.3.1 'They aren't 'spiritual' they are just fun (it's what you do them for)':

In the section *spiritual use is appropriate use* I explored how participants constructed mushrooms as for spiritual self-improvement, in opposition to recreational use which was dismissed as illegitimate. I shall now explore how participants who constructed their use as primarily 'recreational' responded when I introduced discourses of spirituality to their accounts, and shall also examine the differences in the function of these discourses in relation to each other. Firstly, a construction of mushrooms as not spiritual from Tim who has purchased mushrooms legally in Europe and illegally at a UK music festival:

INT: OK cool, a few people mention a kind of spiritual or introspective quality to mushrooms, have you had any experiences like that or

TIM: uh (..) not really no

INT: no

TIM: nothing like that really (.) um not on mushrooms anyway (.) but (.) yeah (.) my mind was sort of, wasn't in a very contemplative state, it was more like yeah euphoric and just trippy state, but yeah nothing like that really, no spiritual type stuff

INT: so just enjoying the trip and enjoying being in that environment

TIM: yeah, I mean, I've sort of had, I could sort of see what they mean about experiences like, with other things but not really with mushrooms

INT: what other things

TIM: like with cannabis, sometimes you have quite spiritual thoughts, and um, and like with MDMA and LSD sometimes as well, it's like you come to really powerful like, reveal-conclusions about like more like philosophical type stuff, but yeah not with mushrooms

Pg. 5, 205-218 [Participant 20]

Tim emphatically constructs mushrooms (through multiple repeated negations; *no* and *not*) as not spiritual in his experience. However, he does construct *other* substances (*LSD*, *MDMA*, *cannabis*)

as spiritual; as occasioning *spiritual thoughts* and consideration of *philosophical type stuff*. Tim does not therefore construct drugs as exclusively recreational; there is the potential for spiritual experience and understanding with some substances, but for him, this is constructed as simply not the case *with mushrooms*. In providing an explanation of why he does not find mushrooms spiritual, it is unclear whether Tim attributes this to the state of mind he was in prior to taking them (his 'set'), or to the state of mind mushrooms can occasion. In spite of this uncertainty Tim still maintains opposition between the spiritual and the recreational. He positions experiences as emanating from the 'state of mind', constructed as either *very contemplative* (spiritual) or *euphoric and just trippy* (recreational). The word 'just' before trippy indicates that a partial construction of legitimacy is still implicit in this dichotomy; tripping and fun are lesser than the contemplative because they are not work, they 'just' are.

In spite of Tim's rejection of mushrooms as spiritual he offers no further constructions of legitimacy or appropriate use. In contrast to the constructions seen in the section *spiritual use is appropriate use*, there is no dismissal of the spiritual, or disavowal of the recreational. Instead, Tim constructs spiritual experiences with mushrooms as something he merely has not encountered; he is not discounting it as implausible or wrong, nor making any claims to legitimacy of purpose in his or others use. The apparent lack of a need to provide constructions which legitimize recreational use when spiritual discourse is raised is further elaborated through a consideration of the following extract from Wendy:

INT: *have you had any spiritual experiences on mushrooms*

WENDY: *no, no even the demon thing with Pete wasn't a spiritual thing it was more a side of Pete no*

INT: *do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person*

WENDY: *yeah, hell yeah very much so, very much so, but I don't think that's to do with my drugs use, I'd say that at the time when I was doing a lot of drugs I wasn't a very spiritual person that's come subsequently (.) yeah*

INT: *do you think you'd find them more spiritual now or is it impossible to say*

WENDY: *yeah I don't know, I don't think so cause again even with the salvia, well salvia does something weird that does feel a bit kind of spiritual about it, but it still kind of feels like you can go down that route if you want to, but like, or you can just go everything's really funny because there's zips everywhere (laughs)*

Pg. 9, 410-422 [Participant 15]

Wendy rejects a spiritual construction of mushrooms as something she hasn't experienced. But when I asked if she thinks of herself as *a spiritual person* (establishing it as an identity rather than

an experience), she takes up this construction, strongly positioning herself as such (*hell yeah very much so*). She then disassociates this identity as a spiritual person from her use of drugs (*I don't think that's to do with my drugs use*). In contrast to participants utilising neo-spiritual discourse, Wendy does not make mushrooms carry the weight of her spirituality. She does not construct them as an aid or tool to making oneself more spiritual but instead constructs becoming a more spiritual individual as separate and *subsequent* to her drug taking. She maintains this construction of separateness when I ask if she may *find [mushrooms] more spiritual now*; responding that it is unlikely that she will. She further illustrates this using her recent experiences with the legal psychedelic salvia³⁰.

In constructing salvia as an example Wendy (re)produces a dichotomy between the spiritual and the recreational (separating them), but does not position this as problematic or oppositional. Unlike in constructions of *spiritual use as appropriate use* where legitimacy is constructed and policed, Wendy does not disavow or denigrate either understanding of drug experience as spiritual or recreational. To Wendy *you can go down that route if you want to*; constructing salvia as possessing the potentiality for spiritual experience (*does feel a bit kind of spiritual*). Alternatively, you can enjoy the novelty of strange experience and hallucinations (*or you can just go everything's really funny because there's zips everywhere*). As such, Wendy constructs a spiritual or recreational experience and understanding of psychedelics as a choice; there is no claim to legitimacy or construction of how mushrooms or other substances 'should' be used. Instead there is an acknowledgement of multiplicity and a positioning of personal preference as that which determines what psychedelics are for, and by extension how magic mushrooms can, rather than should, be used.

7.3.2 Tension and Multiplicity: Combining Uses

Building upon the previous section, a minority of participants constructed magic mushrooms flexibly; as appropriate to consume for both spiritual and recreational purposes depending upon context. However, they did not often do so easily. In the extract below Owen, who has consumed picked indigenous and purchased cultivated mushrooms and truffles in multiple contexts, constructs the relationship between these different constructions of what mushrooms are for (spirituality and recreation) as an uneasy one:

³⁰ Salvia or *salvia divinorum* is psychoactive plant containing the active compound salvinorum-A. It is typically smoked as dry leaves or as extract added to leaf material to increase dosages. It is frequently considered as one of the most potent yet short acting plant-based hallucinogens and at the time of writing is legally sold in Head Shops and online (Griffin, Miller & Khey 2008).

INT: *what do you make of mushrooms as a party or festival drug*

OWEN: *they can be it's fun but you've got to be really careful I think um (.) yeah I don't know (.) hmm because if you do it right then it is a very, it's quite a good hedonist experience with relatively little, there's not really a come down as such um (..) just because it's hedonistic doesn't mean you're doing something bad*

INT: *no not at all*

OWEN: *well I always have to tell myself that*

INT: *why*

OWEN: *I don't know I guess it's, Terrence McKenna always said, like in Western culture that we've grown up in, anything sort of worthwhile or spiritual has to be through an ordeal or you know something like that, you can't just get this instantly without any work and have it feel good as well um (.) so this that's always been in my mind if it doesn't feel deep it's not quite right (.) also the other thing where you're not respecting what you're doing, because this thing is so huge and you don't know what it's about what things could be on the other side, you don't want to disrespect it in any way, you don't want it to come back and get you*

Pg. 5-6, 270-289 [Participant 19]

Owen constructs mushrooms as both recreational and spiritual in their use, but there is tension in his negotiation of these understandings. He constructs mushrooms as potentially recreational; as *fun* and as enabling *a good hedonist experience* with no ill effects if due care is taken. However, Owen then needs to construct a self-reassurance that *just because it's hedonistic doesn't mean you're doing something bad*; a statement which positions recreational use as potentially inappropriate. He does not however denigrate or dismiss the recreational. Instead his construction is one of potential unease rather than rejection; he *always has to tell [him] self that* recreational use is acceptable. In constructing an explanation of his unease, Owen positions the spiritual discursive construction of appropriate use (and its associated function as legitimising spiritual use only) as *always in [his] mind*; undermining his acceptance of recreational use. The implication in his account is that what you 'should' be doing mushrooms for is something *spiritual*. Because this *worthwhile* use of mushrooms has to be *work* in order to be authentic, recreational use of mushrooms is potentially unsettling and frivolous (*you can't just get this instantly without any work and have it feel good*). Fun with mushrooms is further made problematic in Owen's account by associating it with *disrespect* of the potentially profound experiences mushrooms can occasion. However, here Owen departs from neo-spiritual discourse as I have previously argued it, drawing instead upon a parallel-reality and neo-shamanic discourses. *Not respecting* the experience carries the additional fear of potential harm or negative consequence (*you don't want it to come back and*

get you) from the things could be on the other side (entities which occupy a parallel dimension, or reside in the depths of the mind).

The tension in Owen's account is a product of the legitimising force of neo-spiritual (and parallel-reality) discourse in its opposition to the recreational. Whilst Owen does not denigrate or reject recreational use the discourse still functions to undermine the recreational as a potentially inappropriate; that mushrooms have the potential to be understood as spiritual carries a weight that this is how they ought to be used. However, not all participants constructed the negotiation of this dual use of mushrooms as potentially troubling. The below extract is from Greg, who has used picked indigenous mushrooms several times and has once used cultivated mushrooms in Amsterdam:

GREG: *I guess, before I ever took magic mushrooms in the first place I, sort of associated magic mushrooms with a kind of um, kind of spirituality I guess, I sort of perceive psilocybin mushrooms as something, that can be an aid to mental stillness, and on the occasions when I've taken psilocybe by myself, I've kind of tried to do it more seriously, and to try meditating after taking mushrooms, and I think there is definitely something in that it can bring you to a more unitive state of mind*

INT: *OK*

GREG: *but at the same time, I don't think that experiences which you can get through magic mushrooms, or for that matter from any kind of drug is uh, the same, it's not something which you can control so readily so it's still something different I think (.) and as well on occasions when I've taken psilocybe mushrooms with other people it's not really had that element at all its just been having fun (laughs)*

INT: *OK that's different (.) so when you've done them with friends it's more fun*

GREG: *absolutely, yeah definitely, it's something really fun really enjoyable and something really memorable as well, but yeah with other people it's more of a laugh, much less introspective or profound*

Pg. 3, 110-124 [Skype] [Participant 8]

Greg offers an account where mushrooms can be spiritual and recreational, without tension or the need to provide constructs which legitimise either use. Greg positions context and intent as that which renders mushrooms as either fun or spiritual. When on his own, consuming mushrooms with an intention of using them as a tool to *aid mental stillness* and engaging in other concurrent spiritual practices (*meditating after taking mushrooms*), he constructs mushrooms as enabling a *more unitive state of mind*. This construction is infused with neo-spiritual discourse; mushrooms are a tool to be engaged with *seriously* (doing work), and though *different* to other spiritual techniques, serve to help achieve spiritual ends. However, if used in a different context, a social

occasion with friends, Greg represents them as entirely appropriate as recreational agents; as *really fun really enjoyable and something really memorable as well*. He constructs use in this social context as *more of a laugh* with the more spiritual elements lacking or absent; representing it as *much less introspective or profound*.

What is really noteworthy in Greg's account is the lack of any construction of legitimacy or policing of appropriate or inappropriate use. Unlike Owen above there is no tension in using mushrooms recreationally and unlike other participants who construct mushrooms as spiritual Greg does not denigrate or reject hedonism. He does however maintain a dichotomy in his account, mushrooms are either spiritual (when used in isolation) or fun (with others), but are not both simultaneously. Nevertheless, Greg demonstrates the potential for the two discourses to be deployed without competition, allowing context to determine how they should be used and holding neither as superior. In the present data set this was a very minority construction.

In all negotiations of the relationship between neo-spiritual and recreational discourse about what mushrooms are for, there remains one overarching feature; that these understandings of mushrooms are separate. A dichotomy between the construction of mushrooms as for fun and mushrooms as for neo-spiritual ends is maintained throughout all sections of this chapter so far. In order to further illuminate this dichotomy and to challenge the either/or notion of mushrooms as either spiritually valuable or recreational and fun, (endemic in the data extracts and in broader literature), I shall now explore a position outside of this dichotomy: constructions of mushroom experiences as having value and being transformative, regardless of what they are for.

7.4 Value and Transformation: Beyond the Spiritual and Recreational Dichotomy

The dichotomy between recreational and spiritual constructions positions what mushrooms are for in terms of an either/or scenario. These discourses maintain that magic mushrooms are constructed as 'either' for fun and recreation 'or' for spiritual self-improvement (positioned as oppositional to recreational use). Even when participants negotiate these discourses separateness is maintained between mushrooms as enabling 'fun' and mushrooms as doing 'worthwhile' work. I now wish to consider constructions outside of this dichotomy where mushrooms are constructed as both enjoyable and as worthwhile. Firstly, constructions of mushrooms as possessing value.

7.4.1 Value

The extract below is from Alice, who frequently uses large doses of picked indigenous mushrooms:

ALICE: I just think there's actually quite a lot to be gained from a mushroom experience, it's not like you've got to go for a full out, all intense, have loads of them, like I said, the first time I ever did it I had a really small amount, and it was just really nice I just felt really good, everything was really beautiful and I can't see what's (.) well actually, I am a big drug person anyway, I like drugs I think everybody should have drugs, not all the time and not even necessarily more than once, but I think you'll be missing out on something if you don't have like, a recreational drug at least one point in your life (.), you don't have to start raving, but just, it's an experience that's definitely worth having, like one drug to have, like one experience in your whole life and no other experience of an illegal drug I would say do mushrooms, have a mushroom trip and then, don't know, I just think it's definitely worthwhile (.) you get a lot out of it

Pg. 6, 275-284, Participant 3

Alice constructs experiences with magic mushrooms as *definitely worthwhile* and *definitely worth having*; as a valuable and worthwhile experience, for its own sake. She constructs the experiences mushrooms (and other drugs) can occasion as valuable; stating that *you get a lot out of... a mushroom trip* and there is *quite a lot to be gained from a mushroom experience*. The significance she attaches to the experience as personally rewarding can be seen in her statement that to never do mushrooms once in one's lifetime is to be *missing out on something*. Alice is constructing mushroom experiences as worthwhile and as providing something more than 'just fun', but she is not drawing upon spiritual discourse to do so. In Alice's account mushrooms are constructed (directly and by more general association) as *a recreational drug*; a label at odds with the neo-spiritual discourse in which mushrooms are tools to be treated reverently. Alice's construction implies that mushrooms do not have to be made to do 'work' upon the self to be *worthwhile*; simply taking them for fun can result in something positive and profound (she states that *I just felt really good, everything was really beautiful*). This position that drugs only need to be taken in order for them to occasion worthwhile experiences is counter to the legitimizing work of neo-spiritual discourse; in Alice's account fun and worthwhile experience do not have to be mutually exclusive. Similarly, recreational use of mushrooms does not have to be 'just fun'; by associating recreational experiences with worth and value Alice constructs fun with mushrooms as enabling something beyond entertainment and diversion.

The account offered above constructs mushroom experiences which can be recreational as worthwhile and as something of value. However, Alice does not specify what this value is. Other participants offered similar constructions of magic mushroom experiences as worthwhile, but did so without drawing upon the discourses of spirituality. They also constructed fun and enjoyment in

a more profound sense than in previous constructions mobilising recreational discourse; positioning mushrooms as enabling experiences which are positively transformative.

7.4.2 Transformation

Several participants offered constructions of mushrooms as transformative; as occasioning experiences which enable self-improvement but without the need to engage in ‘work’ in order for this to happen. The extract below from Wendy constructs mushrooms as occasioning self-improvement incidentally, even through experiences which appear negative:

WENDY: *even on the night it all went so horribly wrong, I won't ever forget but I don't regret it at all, it still taught me stuff about me like, I don't know, it sounds like over the top but it has become a part of me, as have all my experiences with drugs and I'd certainly be a less rich human being without it, hell yeah (.) I think it can be life changing for some people, but I think it certainly shifts, you're not the same after doing them um, than you were and I think even on bad trips that's not a bad thing*

INT: *just changes something*

WENDY: *yeah you just learn more about yourself is the biggest thing like, fearlessness or something, just like having a proper poke around in your head and seeing what you find, I just think it's never a bad thing, even the absolute horrible trips that at the time are horrendous and you remember that they're horrible, it's still a good thing and I can't really explain that (laughs) sounds like a massive contradiction*

Pg. 9-10, 442-453 [Participant 15]

This extract is part of a longer exchange regarding the merits of taking psychedelics. Wendy is constructing an account of mushroom experiences which were neither recreational nor spiritual; instead those trips where *it all went so horribly wrong*. She uses negative experiences with large doses of mushrooms (*bad trips*) as an extreme example of how mushrooms (and drugs more generally) can be positive and transformative, but does not couch it in spiritual discourse. Wendy constructs mushrooms as evoking rather than enabling self-exploration; positioning mushrooms as teaching *me stuff about me* in an incidental way rather than through an intentional ‘inner journey’. She also constructs mushrooms as occasioning a lasting permanent and positive change, stating that *it can be life changing for some people*. Absent from this account is the policing of appropriate and inappropriate use, she does not argue that mushrooms ‘should’ be used to become a more *rich human being*, instead this is something which just happens. By focusing upon *the absolute horrible trips* Wendy represents the trip itself as occasioning transformation and self-improvement; regardless of where and how they are used *you just learn more about yourself*.

Wendy's account constructs mushrooms as inwardly transformative, as encouraging *a proper poke around in your head*. Another construction of value and transformation common in the data set was more social and outward facing, that mushrooms change your perception of the world. A construction such as this is in the extract below from Mark who has consumed picked indigenous mushrooms over many years. This is in response to a question about significant early experiences with mushrooms:

MARK: *we were just wandering about like children, and we were twenty four twenty five at the time, and we were like five year olds (laughs) full of the joys of spring, we were laughing with big smiley faces, with no egos, it was just an out of this world experience, it was brilliant, and that opens you up to the possibilities of the things that are never reported on TV or in the press (.) you have been prepared to believe the unbelievable (.) it's the realization, the personal experience of it that makes it real to you, that everything's so out of the normal, you've seen life in a totally different way and experienced life in a totally different way, once you've actually gone through that to me it was like opening a door that you'd never go back out of (.) OK you're still in the same world, but you are more open to the possibilities of things not being as they're portrayed in the mainstream reality as most people see it*

INT: *is that what's meant when people say it alters your perception, that it's sort of general*

MARK: *it makes you aware of the possibilities, once you've experienced something you say jeepers that's not the norm, and I've seen it I've smelt it tasted it with my own body, therefore I know it's true, to me it's true (.) so if it's true to me then what else is different, what's been said in one direction that's actually the other*

Pg. 4, 150-164 [Telephone] [Participant 21]

Mark produces an account of an early experience he had with a large dose of mushrooms and a group of friends. He constructs this experience as fun (*we were laughing with big smiley faces*) because of the child like enjoyment the experience occasioned. However, Mark also constructs this experience as transformative; as permanently altering how he perceives the world (*to me it was like opening a door that you'd never go back out of*). He constructs this alteration as one of *openness to possibility*; positioning the mushroom experience as forcing him to consider alternative perceptions of the world and its working that are outside of *mainstream reality*. This change in perception sets the user apart from others who have not had this experience; those who accept the portrayal of events *on TV or in the press* as they are. As such, Mark constructs mushrooms as occasioning profound subjective experiences of otherness (*you've experienced something you say jeepers that's*

not the norm) which force you to question the nature of reality and perception (*what else is different, what's been said in one direction that's actually the other*).

However Mark does not construct mushrooms as tools; they are not 'for' attempting to attain this perceptual shift nor is seeking this an 'appropriate' use of them. Instead he positions this insight as a *realization*, as a result of the profound subjective experience of perceiving *life in a totally different way*. There is no spiritual 'work' undertaken to achieve insight, it just happens. Similarly mushroom experiences are constructed as more than 'just fun'; novelty in Mark's account is more than an entertaining or distracting diversion, it is an indicator of the contingency of his own subjective experience. This is a construction beyond the dichotomy of the recreational and the spiritual. Mark constructs mushrooms as doing something to the person taking them, rather than them being utilized for a particular end.

As with the extract from Alice which opened this section, Mark constructs fun and insight as possible simultaneously; he constructs an enjoyable experience with his friends as the same experience which also provided self-improvement in the form of greater openness to alternative perspectives. That mushrooms can bring about positive transformation through an appreciation of multiple perspectives can also be seen in the extract below from Greg who has primarily used picked indigenous mushrooms:

INT: *so you're saying that a mushroom experience can be quite valuable to people*

GREG: *yeah, I think that just, just recognising or experiencing the fact that (.) the way in which you perceive the world normally, it isn't always like that, there isn't just one way of experiencing life you know there's different ways, and yeah, so I think in terms of that it can open people's eyes to the different ways of seeing the world, different ways of being (.) like your perceptions are changed, and it kind of makes you realise that, if if something affects your perceptions even slightly, you view the world in a completely different way, and that leaves you to question whether the way which you perceive things when you're stone cold sober is actually true*

INT: *OK*

GREG: *I suppose in a nut shell it makes you realise the subjectivity of your own experience, and that's something I feel very strongly myself um, which I've gained through taking magic mushrooms*

Pg. 6, 323-332 [Skype] [Participant 8]

Greg constructs mushrooms as transformative and valuable because they occasion experiences which challenge your perception of truth and *the subjectivity of your own experience*. He constructs magic mushrooms as making the user aware that *there isn't just one way of experiencing life you*

know there's different ways; as bringing about what could be called 'open mindedness'. He contends that experiencing a mushroom induced change in subjective perception forces you to consider multiplicity of experience and multiple perceptions; it leaves you to question whether the way which you perceive things when you're stone cold sober is actually true. Becoming aware of the contingency of your own perspective and experience is represented as positive by Greg; it is something gained through taking magic mushrooms. He does not however position this as 'a way they can be used' or 'what they are for', instead he constructs this as a form of incidental insight; as a realize-ation (much like Mark above).

The implication in the extracts concerning transformation is that taking magic mushrooms for whatever purpose improves you as a person. Not by working upon the self as a project but as something mushrooms 'do to you'. The conclusion of this kind of argument can be seen in the extract below from Frank who has used both picked indigenous and legally and illegally obtained cultivated mushrooms and truffles on numerous occasions. The extract comes from the end of the interview where I asked if he wanted to add anything to what had been said:

FRANK: *I think it would be good if more people did do psychedelics uh, it's probably not for everyone (.) I don't know, some people wouldn't be able to handle it, but then having said that I've had some bad trips where I was freaked out and terrified and uh, one of my friends said to me oh when you have a bad trip it's just like riding a horse just got to get back on it (..) but I think if everyone was given mushrooms like tomorrow I think the world would be a better place the next day*

INT: *really*

FRANK: *I think so yeah (.) somehow yeah it does (..) I don't know I want to say it makes you more compassionate but it feels stupid*

INT: *why does it feel stupid*

FRANK: *I don't know like that sort of blanket (laughs) blanket sort of quote um (.) but yeah they are a good thing and everyone should do it, it makes you a better person*

Pg. 16, 670-86 [Participant 23]

Frank constructs mushroom experiences as occasioning a positive change in people, just through their ingestion (*it would be good if more people did do psychedelics*- there is no construction of in what way in which they 'should' be done). He constructs mushrooms as making you *more compassionate* and ultimately *a better person*- as bringing about positive transformation. As such, Frank constructs a utopian outcome of increased magic mushroom use; *if everyone was given mushrooms like tomorrow I think the world would be a better place the next day*. This is even in spite of potentially negative experiences people could have with them (*some people wouldn't be able to handle it*). This represents mushrooms as incidentally transformative, it is what mushrooms

do to you rather than how you use and take them. However, Frank does mobilise this utopian conception of magic mushroom use with some trepidation; he inoculates against potentially being viewed as naïve by stating *it feels stupid* to construct mushrooms as increasing compassion. Also, he presents himself as wary of making a *blanket* statement. As such, Frank is constructing an ideal; positioning mushrooms as able to bring about positive transformation, but is uneasy with this construction because of the possible allegation that it is idealistic.

In summary the value of magic mushrooms as a means of transformation operates outside of the oppositional dichotomy between the recreational and spiritual discourses. Potentially, it also operates outside of constructions of what mushrooms are for, blurring the line between the purpose of ingestion and what magic mushrooms themselves do to the person using them. It is interesting to note that these constructs of worthwhile experience, positive change and personal insight are divorced from neo-spiritual discourse, which is couched in neo-liberal ideology. It may be that these constructions with their utopian underpinnings are allied to an older construction of what mushrooms are for, which is broadening perception and bringing about personal transformation- an almost ‘psychedelic conception’ of ‘mind manifestation’ (Stafford 1992) associated with the Hippie movement of the 1960s. However, the trepidation expressed by some participants in endorsing the view that magic mushrooms can occasion positive transformative experiences may be a result of the spectre of neo-liberal spiritual discourse. The discourse troubles the sensibility that psychedelics can make oneself a better person without ‘work’, potentially casting it as a naïve ‘hippie’ ideal.

7.5 Summary: Chapter 7 What Magic Mushrooms Are For

In this chapter I explored participants’ constructions of the purpose of taking magic mushrooms. I identified two principle discourses for constructing what magic mushrooms are for. Firstly, *recreational discourse* which constitutes the experiences magic mushrooms occasion as *fun* and as providing *entertainment and shared experiences* in social occasions and with friends. Mushrooms were also constructed as providing *recreation and escapism* through the experiences they occasion: as a transient experiential break from ‘everyday life’ in a similar capacity to holidays and other forms of leisure activity. Secondly, *neo-spiritual discourse* which constituted magic mushrooms as *neo-spiritual tools* that assist in active attempts to enhance introspection, self-improvement, personal-development and spiritual awakening. This discourse was constructed in opposition to recreational use, which was represented as an inappropriate, frivolous and unworthy use of magic mushrooms: *neo-spiritual use* was therefore positioned as *appropriate use*. As such, mushrooms are constructed as for undertaking the ‘work’ of self-enhancement and insight, a spiritualisation of neo-liberal understandings of the self as a project. This discourse serves to legitimise the use of

magic mushrooms for particular ends, ones which align with the contemporary neo-liberal worldview.

In exploring the relationship between the discourses in participant's accounts, a dichotomy between recreational and spiritual understandings of what mushrooms are for was predominant. Whilst a rejection of recreational use as inappropriate was incumbent to neo-spiritual discourse, the reverse was not the case for participants who primarily constructed mushrooms as *just fun*. Instead, the use of mushrooms for both purposes was proposed as possible, though kept separate. This understanding was further developed as one of *tension and multiplicity*; the legitimising power of neo-spiritual discourse unsettled recreational use for some participants, whilst others constructed it as possible for mushroom consumption to be both for spiritual and recreational purposes dependent upon context.

Lastly, a conceptualisation beyond this dichotomy of spiritual or recreational use was offered by participants; one which blurred the boundary between what mushrooms do and what mushrooms are for and which allowed participants to construct their experiences as enjoyable (fun), worthwhile and spiritually insightful. Constructions of *value and transformation* dispensed with the separateness of the spiritual and recreational, instead constructing mushroom experiences as worthwhile and the effect of consuming them as personally transformative regardless of how they are used. This conception shares elements with psychedelic ideology of the mid-20th century, where the use of substances such as mushrooms were conceptualised as changing an individual's perspective upon the world and upon the self. However, as this is a more marginal understanding participants uptake of this discourse was tentative.

Across this and the previous two chapters I have analysed the talk of magic mushroom users with regards to how they make meaning of magic mushrooms and the experiences they occasion. Constructions of what magic mushrooms do, what they are, and what they are for have been explored and the discourses which are negotiated in constituting these understandings have been identified. In the next chapter I shall draw these various strands of analysis together, considering them in relation to each other and to the literature, in the final chapter of this thesis the Discussion.

Chapter 8: Discussion

In this chapter I discuss the findings of this thesis and their wider implications, particularly in light of the current social and political context. I also evaluate the methodology used in this study and the theoretical orientation undertaken in this thesis. Before discussing the findings and evaluating the research undertaken, I briefly summarise the main findings of this study.

8.1 Summary of Empirical Chapters

In Chapter 5 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Do: Altering Reality’ I explored participants’ constructions of how mushrooms alter perceived reality. Three principle discourses were identified: ‘*pharmacological discourse*’ which constituted mushrooms as ‘just drugs’; as pharmacologically active substances that occasion effects through their biological action. ‘*Psychological discourse*’ which enabled construction of mushroom experiences as emanating from the mushrooms users’ psychological architecture: their mind and brain (occasioning neuro-psychedelic experiences and hallucinations), and their psychological orientation (mental state) and beliefs. Thirdly, ‘*parallel-reality discourse*’ which constituted mushrooms as enabling users to ‘break the veil’ between dimensions, allowing them to perceive alternate metaphysical realities populated by discarnate spiritual entities and to undertake neo-shamanic quests to these parallel-realms. I then explored the relationships between these discourses as participants negotiated the constructions of psychology and parallel-reality in their accounts. This included a ‘*rejection of parallel-reality discourses*’, ‘*attempted accommodation*’ of the discourses, and constructing the *value of uncertainty* as protective of the potential ‘madness’ parallel-reality discourse can enable. Lastly in this chapter I explored constructions of ‘*celebrating uncertainty*’, where participants constructed the experiences that mushrooms can occasion as more important than knowing whether a psychological or neo-shamanic account of altered reality was ultimately ‘true’.

In Chapter 6 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Are: Natural Drugs or Being with Agency’ I explored participants’ constructions of magic mushrooms as objects. Mushrooms were constituted through a ‘*discourse of naturalness*’ as a distinct type of ‘natural’ drug, which is safer and more appropriate to consume than synthetic substances and which should not be subject to legal classification as they are a product of the ‘natural world’. This discourse drew upon the concept of ‘naturalness’ as an attribute which legitimised the use of mushrooms. Mushrooms were also constituted through a ‘*discourse of mushroom agency*’ as conscious spiritual beings (or as entities watched over by ‘mushroom gods’) which can act with agency, choosing the kind of experiences a user may have and revealing hidden ‘neo-archaic truths’ about humanities’ relationship to the natural world and spirituality. I also explored scepticism towards these discourses which constitute mushrooms as distinct objects; including constructions that ‘*they’re just a drug*’ (a consumerist account that

challenges the notion of ‘naturalness’ as a superior quality) and *scepticism and irrelevance of mushroom agency and neo-archaic teaching*’ (which identified this discourse as marginal and ‘hippie’).

In Chapter 7 ‘What Magic Mushrooms Are For: Recreation or Spiritual Improvement’ I explored constructions of the purpose of taking mushrooms. In participants’ accounts a dichotomy was present between two principle discourses. ‘*Recreational discourse*’ enabled the construction of mushroom use as for fun, creating entertaining and shared experiences and as providing escape from everyday life. In contrast ‘*neo-spiritual discourse*’ constituted mushrooms as a spiritual tool for undertaking the work of self-exploration and personal development. This discourse operated in opposition to recreational discourse, constructing the neo-spiritual use of mushrooms for self-improvement as appropriate and superior to recreational use, which was constructed as frivolous and improper. I also explored the relationship between these discourses, arguing that constructions of recreational use which challenge constructions of spiritual use do not involve the same negotiation of appropriateness (*‘it’s what you do them for’*). When combining spiritual and recreational uses participants provided accounts of *‘tension and multiplicity’*; the majority represented neo-spiritual discourse as troubling recreational use, whilst a minority were able to construct both uses as acceptable depending upon social context. Lastly, I explored a discourse of *‘value and transformation’* which transcends the recreational versus neo-spiritual dichotomy, constituting mushrooms as occasioning valuable and personally transformative experiences regardless of the purpose of ingesting them. This conception has links with a ‘psychedelic’ understanding of what mushrooms are for from late 20th century counter-cultural ideologies.

Having recapped the contents of the analysis chapters I shall now discuss these findings in relation to each other and the contribution this makes to the literature around magic mushrooms and how meaning is made of them.

8.2 Contribution to Literature: Magic Mushrooms, Neo-liberalism and Neo-shamanism

A major contribution of this thesis to the research literature is in offering a contemporary empirical exploration of how magic mushroom users construct meanings of their use and experiences with magic mushrooms, in the social world of Britain in the 2010s. This is timely, as previous research with magic mushroom users was conducted during a period of legal tolerance and sale of psilocybin mushrooms in Britain (2002-2005) and associated widespread illicit trade in cultivated mushrooms across Europe (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010³¹, Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Tairou, & Zoll 2009). Research conducted during this earlier period found that users’ construction of

³¹ Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010 involved secondary data analysis of data obtained in 2004 during the period of legal tolerance and sale of mushrooms in Britain. It is a separate piece of research to the current thesis.

meanings of magic mushrooms was shaped by the late-modern capitalist discourses of 'neo-liberalism' (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010, Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt 2011³²). Since these prior studies were conducted magic mushrooms have been criminalised in the UK and the widespread trade of cultivated mushrooms ended (Walsh 2006). What remains unchanged however is the continuing function of neo-liberalism as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980) in the current era of late-modern capitalism (Duke 2013, McGuigan 2014). As such, I shall now discuss the findings of this thesis in light of neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism is a system of governance which proposes an ideal self as an autonomous rational choice maker, who enacts subjectivity through economic participation and consumptive activities (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010). Neo-liberal subjects are engaged in a 'self-project'; undertaking personal surveillance and striving towards self-improvement (Rose 1990). Neo-liberal subjects are responsible for their own welfare and are obliged to make 'appropriate choices' in their consumptive activities; with those deemed beneficial to the individual being constructed as moral and acceptable (Griffin et al 2009). The emphasis upon personal choice and the 'self-project' renders neo-liberalism highly individualistic, locating all personal and social responsibilities in the self and marginalising notions of social collectivism (Walkerdine 2003). Riley, Thompson & Griffin (2010) argue that the discourses of neo-liberalism constitute the dominant construction of magic mushroom use by users, rendering collectivist conceptions of magic mushroom use which have their origins in the psychedelic counter-culture of the 1960s unthinkable. Similarly Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt (2011) argue that 21st century social values have robbed users of conceiving of psychedelics as having revolutionary potential, instead constructing 'natural hallucinogen' use as individualised, and as either an act of hedonism or a neo-shamanic act of spiritual self-improvement.

I argue from the data of the current thesis that certain discourses and associated conceptions of magic mushrooms align with tenets of neo-liberalism. However, I also demonstrate that counter-cultural constructions of magic mushrooms and mushroom experiences are mobilised by users, although they are marginalised by neo-liberal discourses. I also argue that marginalised, radical and critical constructions of magic mushrooms influenced by psychedelic discourse and neo-shamanism were produced in some participant's accounts. However, these constructions discursively re-located revolutionary potential to the individual, rather than in the collective domain.

³² Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt (2011) do not explicitly use the term 'neo-liberalism', but present an account of mainstream cultural values and subjectivity which is recognisably 'neo-liberal'.

8.2.1 Magic Mushrooms: Neo-liberalism- Just Drugs and Drugs of Distinction

Within the current thesis the meanings of magic mushrooms and what they do, are, and are for, were constructed through multiple discourses. These multiple discourses can be taken to constitute magic mushrooms as objects and as experiences in three relatively coherent ways. These categorisations are not mutually exclusive and there is cross-over and tension between these understandings. I shall now outline these categorisations and discuss their relationship with each other and neo-liberal meta-discourse, arguing that neo-liberal discourses serves to marginalise but not eliminate counter-cultural discourses.

The first conception of magic mushrooms drawn from discourses identified in the data constitutes them as '*just drugs*'. This represents mushrooms as consumable recreational substances, taken for 'fun' due to the novelty and pleasure of the experiences they occasion. This includes both subjective 'trip' experiences (e.g. euphoria, perceptual disturbances etc.) and enhancing social activities at festive events with friends. Magic mushrooms were constructed as one recreational substance within an array of possible alternatives, favoured for their pharmacological effects and consumed due to their availability. This conception of mushrooms was primarily established through 'pharmacological discourse', which enabled constructions of mushrooms as occasioning particular experiences through their biological action. It was further constituted through 'discourses of commodity'; constructing mushrooms as a purchasable and saleable (both legally and illegally) recreational 'drug' which is equivalent to other substances in its social function. The representation of magic mushrooms as '*just drugs*' does not encompass all participants' constructions of recreational use. It is reserved for those representations of mushrooms as 'nothing more than' hedonistic substances which occasion pleasing effects, and which are similar to other obtainable substances consumed for similar recreational and festive reasons.

Conceptualising magic mushrooms as '*just drugs*' does not an entirely ally with neo-liberalism, but neither does it present a challenge to it. The representation of magic mushrooms as '*just drugs*' and as 'just for fun' undermines constructions that they can occasion experiences of counter-cultural realisation (Leary 1969). Contrary to the psychedelic conception that mushrooms may occasion experiences that enable critical reappraisal of culture (Wells 1973), understanding mushrooms as 'just drugs' instead casts mushroom experiences as providing entertainment, recreation and escape from '*everyday life*' (Sam, Chapter 7, pg. 170). The use of mushrooms is therefore understood as a recreational consumptive leisure activity and mushroom experiences are constructed as temporary diversions from economic participation, undertaken in appropriate times and places (e.g. holidays, weekends, etc.) with no revolutionary potential (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010, Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt 2011).

The second conception of magic mushrooms enabled representation of them as more than ‘just drugs’, instead constructing them as ‘*drugs of distinction*’. The discourses which constitute this understanding are diverse. All share the function of representing magic mushrooms as psychoactive substances possessing special qualities or attributes which make them distinct from, or superior to, other ‘drugs’. This was accomplished in a number of ways. Firstly through the use of ‘psychological discourse’ to establish what mushrooms do as more than occasioning biological effects: instead mushrooms were constructed as tapping into hidden and usually inaccessible parts of the brain and mind. Secondly, the deployment of the ‘discourse of naturalness’ enabled constructions of mushrooms as superior to synthetic substances, representing them as salubrious untainted products of the ‘natural world’. This discourse served to legitimise the use of magic mushrooms by constructing an equivalence between mushrooms and humans as biological entities which have co-evolved, and as such represents ingesting and using mushrooms as ‘natural’. This reconstruction of nature (Harraway 1991) not only served to legitimise use but became the basis of arguments for rejecting the illegal status of mushrooms and associated criminality of being a mushroom user. Participants argued that banning mushrooms was equivalent to making nature illegal. The need to construct the use of mushrooms as a ‘healthy’ and appropriate ‘natural’ undertaking and to distance oneself from criminality may be due to neo-liberal conceptions of the user as responsible for making ‘healthy’ and appropriate choices in their consumptive practices (Griffin et al 2009).

Mushrooms were also constructed as drugs of distinction through the deployment of neo-spiritual discourse; constructions which are the most overtly aligned with neo-liberal meta-discourse in the data set. Neo-spiritual discourse enabled participants to construct magic mushroom use as for personal development and self-improvement: representing mushrooms as ‘tools’ for undertaking work upon the self-project through introspection and personal exploration. This is a goal that endorses the neo-liberal project (Rimke 2000); participants constructed themselves as responsible for undertaking an individualised development of a ‘better’ self through spiritual awareness (Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt 2011). Spirituality in this discourse is psychological, individualised and is associated with New Age conceptions of developing experiential self-knowledge through technologies of introspection (e.g. meditation) (Redden 2002). Neo-spiritual discourse therefore conceptualises magic mushrooms as one of these technologies and their use as for undertaking this self-development.

Neo-spiritual discourse was deployed in strong opposition to recreational use, which was positioned as a frivolous and unworthy activity. In contrast neo-spiritual use was constructed as the ‘appropriate’ way to use mushrooms. This links to neo-liberalism through the legitimising function of neo-spiritual discourse, serving to represent mushroom use as a worthwhile activity by

constructing it as exclusively for undertaking work upon the self-project. This conception serves to marginalise alternative counter-cultural understandings of what mushrooms are for by policing appropriate use as one of active individual self-improvement. The psychedelic conception of the 1960s constructed psychedelic experiences as changing an individual's world view in an outward facing way; as encouraging one to 'turn on' to the limitations of contemporary culture and 'tune in' to a collective spiritual alternative (Wells 1973). In contrast neo-spiritual discourse constructs psychedelic experiences as neo-liberal tools for inward facing self-improvement, divorced from any revolutionary or critical consideration beyond the self. This finding extends those of Riley, Thompson, & Griffin (2010); it is not only citizenry that is colonised by neoliberal discourse and used to construct 'appropriate use' it is also the spiritual and personal development realm of the individual where neo-liberalism re-constructs what mushrooms are for. This also adds empirical support to claims made by Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt (2011) that there is a late modern expectation to develop a private spiritual self and that natural hallucinogens have been co-opted into this role.

8.2.2 Limited Resistance: Neo-Shamanic Sacraments and the Spectre of Psychedelia

The third conception of magic mushrooms was as '*neo-shamanic sacraments*': as powerful spiritual beings with agency, which allow the user to quest to or perceive alternate dimensions and interact with discarnate entities. Mushrooms were also constructed as teaching or revealing 'neo-archaic truths' about spiritual environmentalism. This conception of magic mushrooms is influenced by neo-shamanism (Wallis 1999) and its association with psychedelics as popularised by auto-ethnographic writers and thinkers such as Castaneda (1968) and McKenna (1992, 1991). This conception is linked with animism and is counter to the dominant discourses of rational subjectivity and scientism (Letcher 2007), with participants often having to justify this particular understanding. It was also the most marginal conception of magic mushrooms in the data set, yet a prevalent one.

The relationship between neo-shamanic constructions of magic mushrooms and neo-liberalism is complicated. Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt (2011) argue that neo-shamanism is ostensibly neo-liberal; although metaphysical and esoteric (constructing discarnate entities and parallel-dimensions as existing), it is aligned with the responsibility of subjects to attain personal spiritual meanings in order to improve the self. However, Wallis (1999) argues that neo-shamanism is not a product of neo-liberalism, but is instead an important aspect of post-modern critiques of society due to its alternative orientation to what constitutes reality, with associations with radical spirituality and ecological idealism. In the present thesis neo-shamanic conceptions of magic mushrooms and their use aligned with both of these understandings and occupied a space between them. Neo-shamanism's operation within the confines of neoliberal discourse is evident in

constructions of metaphysical insight as an individual activity divorced from social concerns. When participants constructed mushrooms as allowing them to break the veil and journey to other realms it was primarily represented as a novel spiritual undertaking, or interesting weird experience rather than as providing critical insight. Similarly, 'hippies' were constructed in the data set as characters immersed in neo-shamanism but who were enacting a naive and idealised form of self-expression or a 'wacky' use of mushrooms for personal metaphysical ends, rather than as engaged in a critical rejection of dominant culture.

Some talk of neo-shamanism is critical and counter-cultural, particularly accounts of mushrooms as enabling revelation of 'neo-archaic truth' (McKenna 1992). This included constructions of mushroom experiences as awakening radical environmental insight and claims that the use of mushrooms can provide an alternative critical worldview, one which is antithetical to the dominant 'synthetic' culture of capitalism. Constructions of this kind represented 'tripping' as a means of awakening one to the 'bullshit' of contemporary existence and of obtaining insight into a 'neo-archaic' spiritual alternative.

However, constructions of the revolutionary potential of 'neo-archaic truth' were marginal. This is evidenced by its absence (or 'irrelevance') in the majority of participant's accounts, and its dismissal through 'discourses of scepticism' as something which 'hippies' (denoting marginalised outsiders) naively believe. The marginality of neo-archaic and broader neo-shamanic discourse is due in part to the dominance of neo-liberal understandings of what mushrooms do, are and are for; neo-archaicism represents an active challenge to the ways the neo-liberal project constructs values and is therefore dismissed as 'hippie'. A further potential reason for the marginality of counter-cultural constructions of magic mushrooms is the esoteric or supernatural aspects of neo-archaic discourse. Constructions of mushrooms as providing radical and critical insight into present social values (and as illuminating alternative social and environmental values) were cast in metaphysical or supernatural terms and associated with 'shamanism'. This association may mean that this discourse is further marginalised due to the psycho-pharmacological 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980) which operated in participants accounts to construct mushroom experiences as psychological or pharmacological in origin.

This is not to say that counter-cultural constructions informed by neo-shamanic discourse were shut down entirely, but the dominance of neo-liberal and psycho-pharmacological discourses may go some way towards explaining their marginality. What is clear however is that neo-shamanic discourse is more complicated and less evidently neo-liberal than previous research has attested (e.g. Milhet & Reynaud-Maurupt 2011). Further research should explore this potential of neo-shamanism as a discourse of resistance to neo-liberalism.

The three conceptions outlined above are all subject to the influence of neo-liberal discourse and this serves to marginalise the counter-cultural potential of magic mushrooms as a psychedelic substance, instead enabling constructions of mushrooms as recreational, spiritual and metaphysical agents which are not challenging to neo-liberal ideology. Neo-shamanism appears to offer a potential site of resistance to neo-liberal subjectivity, but this is marginalised by the 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980) which understanding mushrooms as 'drugs'. It is possible that the outlandish construction of reality as metaphysical and shamanic incumbent to constructions of neo-shamanism is too difficult to accept in the contemporary era of scientism and materialism (Letcher 2007), and as such the relegation of the revolutionary potential of mushrooms to 'hippie'³³ idealism may strengthen neo-liberal discourses of psychedelics.

However, a potential still exists for a critical or psychedelic understanding of magic mushrooms beyond the confines of neo-liberal subjectivity; constructions of magic mushroom experiences as possessing value and as enabling personally transformative experiences regardless of intent or the purpose of their use. These constructions promoted the idea that mushrooms do something to you, rather than needing to be used in a particular way, and that what they do is to enable critical insight into one's own subjective perspective, encouraging a questioning of the broader social world. One participant tentatively suggested that if more people were to consume magic mushrooms regardless of the reasons why, it may 'make the world a better place' due to the insight that can be gained (Frank, pg. 188). This construction is an echo of the 1960s Hippie advocating of mass LSD consumption as a political project (Wells 1973). This was a marginal position which I argue represents a vestige of counter-cultural and psychedelic discourses for understanding what mushrooms do, are and are for. Whilst neo-liberally informed discourses may operate as the dominant meaning making resource for conceptualising magic mushrooms, there still remains the notion that they can 'turn you on and tune you in' (Wells 1973), even if it is marginal and cautiously deployed by participants. This suggests that mushrooms still have the potential to occasion experiences which can be made sense of as profound, transformative, valuable and 'psychedelic'. There is still the possibility of resistance, but it is resistance at an individualised level, as unlike the 1960s there is no social movement for the revolutionary use of psychedelics in the present social world.

³³ 'Hippie' is used in an implicitly pejorative way in this thesis: positioning people as immersed in a spiritual worldview (neo-shamanism) at odds with contemporary regimes of truth (neoliberalism and materialism) which is constructed as counter-rational and naive. However, participants do not deploy 'hippie' in an explicitly pejorative sense; instead it functions as a heuristic for those who embrace neo-shamanism. Why 'hippie' is a problematic term with implicit and potentially explicit pejorative connotations in the contemporary social world is both an indicator of the marginality of neo-shamanic worldviews, and a question for further research.

8.3 Specific Arguments from Data Analysis

In addition to the broader findings of how mushrooms were constituted and the relationship of this to contemporary neoliberal order, other findings were made which address more specific aspects of constructing magic mushrooms use and its meanings. As such, I shall now discuss these findings with specific reference to the relevant empirical chapters from which they are taken.

In Chapter 5, 'What Magic Mushrooms Do' it was found that psycho-pharmacological (psychological and pharmacological) discourses act as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980) in constructing the reality of experiences with psilocybin mushrooms for the majority of participants. This suggests that the public uptake and perception of psychopharmacological research and realisation of experiences as neurobiological (Pitts-Taylor 2010, Langlitz 2010) have shaped the ways people constitute the reality of psychedelic experiences. However, alternative constructions of reality based on parallel-reality discourses were also provided by participants, suggesting that psychological and pharmacological conceptions do not entirely constitute how reality is made sense of, and that there is space for the 'mad' construction of animism (Letcher 2007). When negotiating psychological and pharmacological conceptions of what mushrooms do at the same time as parallel-reality discourses, psychological discourses 'shape the nature of resistance' (Foucault 1979), either needing to be accommodated, or shutting down the potential for constructions of experiences as metaphysical. However, constructions of experience can still trouble the 'truth' of psychological discourse, and uncertainty (and its celebration) becomes a valuable discursive tool for making sense of mushroom experiences. This finding offers empirical support to claims by Letcher (2007) that animism/parallel-reality as a discourse for sense making of magic mushrooms sits outside the contemporary regime of truth of psychological science, but is still used by some users. It also adds a notion of complexity as subjects are not forced into making an either/or decision in constructing meaning of mushroom experiences as psychological and esoteric, as they can instead opt out by celebrating uncertainty. This finding has implications for other research where people attempt to account for unusual experiences seemingly beyond the contemporary scientific zeitgeist.

In Chapter 6, 'What Magic Mushrooms Are' a 'discourse of naturalness' was mobilised to legitimise mushroom use as a 'natural' and therefore acceptable activity in contrast to the use of 'synthetic' (and 'unnatural') substances, it was also used to reject criminality associated with present illegal mushroom use. Participants' use of this discourse challenges the conclusion of Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Taiou, & Zoll (2009) that the status of hallucinogens as 'natural products' does not matter to users and availability is all that counts. My findings suggest that to some users there is a function and value to constructions of mushrooms as products of the natural world. Interestingly, this discourse was extended to legitimise the use of other, less 'natural'

seeming substances which participants favoured, such as cocaine. In the present climate suspicion of the synthetic does not seem to affect the current substantial uptake of ‘legal highs’³⁴ (Hillebrand, Olszewski & Sedefov 2010) and it would be interesting for further research to explore the function and negotiation of discourses of naturalness in this context.

Lastly, across the data set it is noteworthy that substantial effort is expended by participants to justify and legitimise their use of magic mushrooms. They are not just constructed as needing to be used in an ‘appropriate way’ or in appropriate contexts (Riley, Thompson & Griffin 2010); instead there is repeated recourse to multiple discourses mobilised to justify why consuming psilocybin mushrooms should be legal, and that they are ‘natural’ and beneficial to consume. This may be due to the change in legislation since previous research was conducted: the criminalisation and illegality of magic mushrooms means that participants have to undertake greater work in explaining and justifying their use. Whilst it was beyond the scope of the present thesis to directly address the impact of the criminalisation of magic mushrooms upon users’ constructions, it would be interesting if further research could explore the implications of legal status upon the ways in which the use of substances is justified and legitimised.

Having considered the findings of this thesis and their implications I shall now evaluate the methodology undertaken in the production of these findings.

8.4 Methodological Evaluations

There are advantages and limitations to the methodological decisions made in this thesis. I shall now discuss and evaluate key aspects of the methodology, including sampling and recruitment, the use of interviews as a data source, the use of multiple interview modalities (face-to-face, Skype and telephone), and the style of interview undertaken (a combination of narrative, semi-structured and active).

8.4.1 Recruitment and Sampling

A range of recruitment strategies were employed in this thesis to attempt to access the relatively ‘hidden’ population (Lee 1993) of magic mushroom users. This initially involved snowball sampling, and subsequently open recruitment via posters displayed in prevalent public locations (e.g. public notice boards and the windows of Head Shops), as well as the use of an internet advertisement on the University of Bath website. This strategy yielded 23 participants who consented to be interviewed and all matched the sampling criteria of being over 18 years of age, of having had two or more experiences with magic mushrooms, and all expressed a desire to consume

³⁴ Synthetic chemicals with a functional similarity to controlled substances, but which are sufficiently different in chemical structure to avoid legal classification (Hillebrand, Olszewski & Sedefov 2010).

them again (see Chapter 4 Methodology for more detail on participants recruited). Despite the current illegal status of magic mushrooms the number of participants obtained was comparable to studies conducted during periods of legal tolerance or widespread availability of cultivated mushrooms. For example, Riley & Blackman (2008) obtained 25 focus group participants, and Reynaud-Maurupt, Cadet-Tairou, & Zoll (2009) interviewed 30 participants.

The recruitment strategy was successful in obtaining a demographically diverse sample (from a wide range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, ages and genders) with varied of 'styles' of magic mushroom use. Participants were recruited who consumed different varieties of mushrooms (indigenous and cultivated), obtained illegally and during periods of legal tolerance, consumed in different social contexts, with differing levels of frequency, and with preferences for different doses (low to 'heroic'). Similarly participants had different levels of engagement with 'psychedelic culture'; including participants who did, and participants who did not, engage with popular psychedelic literature, art, and media. The sample fits the research criteria and intended recruitment well, and the data obtained is appropriate for addressing the research question and aims of exploring what magic mushrooms mean to those that consume them.

In spite of this success, there are limitations to the recruitment strategy and sample obtained. The sample does not offer a representative geographical view of mushroom users across the UK, and is limited in this regard. A wider recruitment strategy could have involved placing advertisements in national publications associated with psychedelic or club/festival cultures, but this was limited by research budget. Similarly, a wider online recruitment strategy could have been undertaken: posting adverts on forums and mailing lists for websites associated with psychedelic use. This was not undertaken due to concern about excluding users whose mushroom use was more 'casual' or drug orientated, and over-recruiting users who are immersed in 'psychedelic culture'. This decision may have been overzealous, as this method of recruitment has been successfully used to obtain a variety of psychedelic users in survey research (e.g. Carhart-Harris & Nutt 2010). Participants could have been sampled from a wider geographical area by combining online recruitment with distance interview methods (Skype and telephone), a possibility realised after completion of the study. However, it is debateable as to the extent to which a wider geographical recruitment strategy would have affected the discourses identified and data obtained.

The present sample is inherently self-selecting: all participants responded to advertising with a desire to discuss their use of and experiences with magic mushrooms. This limitation is difficult to overcome and attrition rates were relatively high for this study. Twelve people in total expressed interest in participating but then ceased communication, despite a follow-up email or phone call being made. Two respondents who declined to participate provided as reasons not being able to find a convenient time for interview, and the lack of payment for participation. The decision was

made not to provide payment for participation in this study due to the absence of funds, and concerns that it may lead to ‘buying stories’ rather than attracting those who wanted to discuss their mushroom use. All potential participants were informed that interviews could be conducted in times and places of their convenience, as well as via Skype or telephone. Efforts were made to suit participant needs in terms of location, time and privacy, as best as could be achieved. It is only possible to speculate why respondents declined to participate; but it may be due to a loss of interest, decision against participation upon receipt of more information about the study, or it may be that some respondents expressed curiosity about an unusual research project without a genuine desire to participate. Future research would benefit from broad recruitment strategies and should expect a high rate of attrition.

An underexplored aspect of the sample in the current thesis is that of ‘social class’. The sample included participants with varied employment statuses (including students, unemployed, self-employed, and employed) and levels of education (including participants who ceased formal education aged 16 and participants with doctorates). The relationship between social class and the construction of meaning of magic mushrooms was beyond the scope of the current study. Anecdotally, however, there did not appear to be a clear association between participants’ educational background and/or employment status and the nature of the discourses they used in the construction of meaning. Social class and the construction of meanings around psychedelic use is an important area for further research.

A limitation of the sample obtained is that it is ethnically homogenous: all participants are of white European decent. Although this was not intentional, no attempts were made to specifically recruit mushroom users from ethnic minorities. The issue of ethnicity and psychedelics in the West has largely been overlooked in the research literature; both in terms of how substances are constructed and researched academically (Persad 2010) and in ethnographies exploring cultures associated with psychedelic use (Saldanha 2007). Whilst it was beyond the scope of this study to explore the potential relationship between ethnicity and psychedelic use, further research should explore this omission and attempt to recruit participants from a range of ethnicities in order to explore issues of ethnicity and culture in the consumption of psychedelics.

As well as increasing ethnic diversity, further efforts could have been made to actively target particular ‘styles’ of mushroom user by recruiting in leisure sites appropriate to these groups beyond Head Shops and public notice boards. For example, at nightclubs which host PsyTrance events with possible links to the free-party community, or targeting Neo-Pagan groups to increase recruitment of mushroom users linked to neo-shamanism. Whilst this was not considered essential given the epistemological focus of the study upon exploring constructions from a wide variety of

users, this recruitment strategy may also have enabled expansion of the methodology beyond the use of interviews in this study, which I address in the following section.

8.4.2 Evaluation of the Use of Interviews

Interviews provided data appropriate to answer the research question of how meaning is made of magic mushrooms by mushroom users. Interviews also provided data suitable for achieving the research aims of empirically exploring conceptions of mushroom use and experiences suggested by the research literatures (i.e. psychological, entheogenic, hedonistic, and animistic understandings of magic mushrooms). Interviews were conceptualised as a particular kind of interactive conversational context with an agenda (Griffin 2007a, Miller & Glassner 2004), where magic mushroom users were invited to discuss their experiences. By considering how users construct meanings of magic mushrooms through interactive talk in interviews, it has been possible to explore their negotiation of available discourses (Griffin 2007a, Martin & Stenner 2004) in providing accounts of what magic mushrooms do, what they are, and what they are for. Participants were conceptualised as always involved in the construction of meaning in social interactions in everyday life (Holstein & Gubrium 2004), and the discourses used and meanings constructed within interviews exist and function outside of the immediate research context (Griffin 2007a). As such, they are indicative of understandings which exist socially (Martin & Stenner 2004). Whilst interviews enabled the production of data from which discourses and their use in interactive talk could be identified and explored, the use of interviews in this study is limited in number of ways. I shall now discuss potential alternative or complimentary methodologies in evaluating the use of interviews in the present research.

Interviews produce data where discursive understandings are negotiated by individual subjects in a setting abstracted from the social or cultural contexts of mushroom use. This is of relevance to research with magic mushrooms because of the ways in which they are used. Whilst some participants did report engagement with mushrooms as a solitary spiritual or shamanic pursuit, for many they were primarily consumed socially at festive occasions with groups of friends. The use of focus groups, or ethnographic fieldwork in conjunction with interviews (Griffin & Bengry-Howell 2008), could have potentially aided in further situating meanings in the social and cultural contexts of drug use (Duff 2007). I shall now discuss consideration of these alternative methods in the current study.

Previous focus group research with magic mushroom users was conducted during the period of legal tolerance and open sale of mushrooms in the UK between 2002 and 2005 and participants were recruited from retail sites where mushrooms were obtained (Riley & Blackman 2008). The current illegality of mushrooms has made focus groups harder to conduct due to the inability to

target advertising at retail sites, and potential stigma of illegal drug use (Letcher 2007). In the present study key informants were unwilling to participate in focus groups with other mushroom users unknown to them, fearing that recognition by strangers as a 'drug user' may endanger their social or employment status. They also raised a concern of potential hostility between focus group members due to the difficulties of negotiating authenticity when discussing outlandish experiences (Coco & Woodward 2007). In practical terms participants were recruited from a wide geographical area, making focus groups difficult to organise. For these ethical and practical reasons focus groups were rejected as a data source in the present study.

Focus groups could potentially be used if social groups that use mushrooms could be recruited on mass. This would eliminate the potential ethical issues of privacy as participants in each focus group all know each other, as well as resolving issues of geographical separateness. In the present study this was not possible due to key informants being unable to recruit sufficient participants from their social networks, a problem which inspired the use of open recruitment methods more generally.

Recruiting friendship groups or members of a shared social scene which uses mushrooms could potentially have been facilitated by the use of ethnographic methods (Moore 2004). Ethnographic methods may also enable greater social and cultural situation (Griffin & Bengry-Howell 2008) of the meanings constructed of mushrooms by participant observation of use contexts. This may include observation at music festivals, free parties, and (although difficult to access) small group contexts such as private social and ritual events. This was not undertaken in the present study due to my lack of 'insider status' (Measham & Moore 2006) with psychedelic affiliated social scenes (e.g. PsyTrance free-party and festivals), and the inability of key informants to provide me with access to these scenes or related groups of users (the importance of which is discussed by Tramacchi 2000). Attempting to recruit and participant observe groups of mushroom users without the support of key informants' raises issues of negotiating access (Griffin & Bengry-Howell 2008), which in turn highlights ethical issues around mushroom consumption. In ethnographic research it is often necessary to participate in the activities of those you are researching in order to be considered legitimate (Griffin & Bengry-Howell 2008), in this case consuming magic mushrooms. Similarly, if access was obtained it would be necessary to observe participants engaged in the illegal activity of consuming psilocybin mushrooms, a Class A scheduled substance. In the present study negotiating the consumption of the substance as a researcher, or being present and potentially complicit in others illegal activity, are ethical and legal issues considered to be beyond the remit of this PhD thesis. Although challenging to accomplish, further research would potentially benefit from the use of ethnographic and focus group methodologies, to further situate the meanings made of magic mushrooms in context.

A less challenging alternative methodology considered in the present thesis was the use of naturalistic records, particularly online forums and discussion boards (Montague 2008) (e.g. www.shroomery.org). I have justified in detail the decision not to use online forum data in Chapter 4 Methodology. However, had it been used in conjunction with interviews it may have helped address potential limitations of artificiality or contrivance (Speer 2008). There is an inevitable trade off in the use of naturalistic or contrived methods between ecological validity and the ability to directly engage participants to explore a topic and its construction in interaction. The absence of naturalistic data in this thesis is a limitation, but was due largely to concerns of space and depth in terms of what was achievable in a thesis. Further research should consider the discourses identified and their use by participants highlighted in the present analysis of interview data, in the context of more naturalistic data such as online forums.

A further limitation of this study brought about by not using internet forums is the absence of engagement with ‘counter public’ discourses concerning drug use and their meaning which are prevalent online (Barratt, Allen & Lenton 2014). In recent years critical drug research has indicated that the internet provides a space for users to construct the meaning of drugs and drug experience, outside of the typical discursive constraints of the offline world (Walsh 2011, Barratt, Allen & Lenton 2014). Whilst it was beyond the scope of the current study to address the impact of online forums as meaning making spaces for magic mushroom users, further research should explore this and how it intersects with discursive constructions in the offline world.

Having discussed alternative and complimentary methodologies in addressing the limitations of interviews generally, I shall now evaluate the conducting of interviews in the present thesis beginning with the use of multiple modalities.

8.4.3 Evaluation of Interview Modalities: Skype, Telephone and Face-To-Face

Distance and in person interview modalities were employed through use of Skype online video call software, telephone, and face-to-face interviews. Distance methods were initially employed to reach participants recruited through snowballing who were located outside of the UK, but the option of choosing the modality for interview was extended to all participants. This was advantageous as it enabled a recruitment of participants from a wider geographical area, and it also increased the potential for participant privacy and anonymity as they could conduct interviews from their own homes (Holt 2010, Hanna 2012). In the present study one participant chose to be interviewed by telephone for this reason, the remaining four participants who opted for distance methods did so due to geographical location.

I have argued in Chapter 4 Methodology that the data produced from all three interview modalities is largely equivalent as it enables the production of typed transcripts of spoken interviews. However, I cannot be certain that the absence or presence of visual cues (facial expression, body language, etc.) and physical context did not either positively or negatively influence participant responses across different interview modalities. It is typically assumed that physical absence (in Skype interviews) and a lack of visual cues (in telephone interviews) reduces rapport, stifles conversational exchange and limits data richness compared to face-to-face interviews (Rubin & Rubin 2005, Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Conversely, proponents of distance interview methods argue that they increase participant privacy and anonymity and reduce the power dynamic between researcher and researched, by removing the physical and social context of the ‘interview encounter’ (Hanna 2012, Novick 2008). As such, in the present study it is possible that participants interviewed face-to-face in the researcher’s office may have been subject to a greater imposition of demand characteristics. Similarly participants interviewed in public locations may have ‘held back’ in their accounts due to concerns of being overheard discussing illegal drug use by strangers.

Whilst these concerns over face-to-face and distance interviewing are legitimate they do not wholly undermine the data obtained. In the current study the quality of accounts produced by different modalities of interviewing is comparable. Interviews were of a similar range of durations and accounts offered, and discussions had, were of a similar richness and depth across all modes and in all locations (both public and private) of interviewing. Any variation between duration and contents of interviews is foremost a result of individual differences between participants (how much they had to discuss), rather than a consistent effect of interview modality. This is in keeping with findings of Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) who in a systematic comparison of telephone and face-to-face interviews found no difference in the quantity, depth, and nature of the data generated. In the present study a concerted effort was made to attend to participants verbal and where appropriate non-verbal cues via active listening in all modalities. Active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium 2004) was also employed to attempt to reduce potential power dynamics regardless of interview mode. In the interests of transparency, all data obtained from distance methods was labelled as such throughout analysis. On reflection it may have been helpful to extend this transparency to include the location of each interview conducted face-to-face, with labels such as ‘in participants home’ or ‘in public location’ to provide the reader with greater contextual information.

Participants were invited to choose the place, time, and modality of the interview regardless of their geographical location. Those that decided to be interviewed in public or at the researchers’ office did so of their own volition. The comparable nature of accounts between modalities adds support to the use of distance methods as a flexible tool in conducting interviews, especially with a ‘hidden’ population such as psychedelic users. Further research should consider uses of Skype and

telephones, as well as greater transparency about the real world contexts in which interviews were conducted.

8.4.4 Evaluation of Interview Style: Narrative, Semi-structured and Active.

Across all interview modalities the style of interview undertaken was intended to address the inductive nature of the research question and the theoretical aims of the project. This required addressing the broad question of how meaning is constructed of magic mushrooms, and exploring how participants engaged with conceptions of magic mushrooms relevant to the research literatures (entheogenic, hedonistic, psychological and animistic discourses). This was achieved via a combination of narrative (Elliot 2005) and semi-structured interviewing (Smith 1995). This interview style was intended to combine the best of both approaches. Interviews were opened with narrative questions enabling participants to situate accounts of their mushroom use and experiences within their lives and to produce narratives without imposition from the researcher (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Semi-structured interviewing then enabled the subsequent flexible discussion of topics of interest (Smith 1995). This approach was advantageous in addressing participant's difficulty in articulating accounts of psychedelic experiences, which can be complex and partially ineffable (Slattery 2008). The narrative portion of the interview allowed participants to recollect their experiences and provide accounts of their use, which could subsequently be expanded upon through responses to direct questions. Similarly if areas of interest did not arise spontaneously in narratives questions could be asked which further sparked conversation and discussion, adding richness to the data obtained (Smith 1995).

A possible criticism of the use of semi-structured interviewing is that participant's responses may have been 'forced' to some extent, as they did not always elect to discuss topics which did not arise in narrative accounts (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). However, as Duncombe & Jessop (2002) note it is often assumed that the asking of a question forces the elicitation of a response from a participant, where as participants can exercise some choice in refusing to answer questions either due to unwillingness or a lack of experience of the phenomena. This occurred in the current thesis and data used in analysis includes participant accounts of lacking awareness or experience of particular discourses or phenomena (for an example, see Chapter 6 What Magic Mushrooms Are, pg. 158 where Tim states he has not considered the naturalness of mushrooms prior to the interview).

In conducting interviews an 'active interview' (Holstein & Grubrium 2004) style was undertaken, where interviews were conducted in a conversational manner (Rubin & Rubin 2005). The use of active interviewing was largely successful in the current study, participants appeared to respond well to the interview style and I also shared anecdotes, opinions and responded to questions several participants asked of me. Whilst the use of active interviewing can lead to some digression in

interviews (Rubin & Rubin 2005), this was managed via use of an interview schedule and did not substantively undermine the quality of data generated. Where active interviewing may have been less successful was in diminishing the power imbalance of researcher and researched (Skeggs 2002). Whilst I include my utterances in data analysis, it is primarily as an interviewer rather than as a participant. This was due to my not having used magic mushrooms and the epistemological focus of the thesis being upon mushroom users accounts. Although I attempted to actively engage with participant's there was an element of taking a position as 'interviewer' as I set the agenda of discussion. There is a trade-off between retaining structure and focus in the interview and losing conversational freedom, or engaging in a more open conversation that drifts from the area of research focus (Rubin & Rubin 2005). In the present study I attempted to strike a balance between these two difficult positions, and was largely successful as reflected in the richness of the data obtained. For a fuller account of how my role as researcher may have affected the conducting of interviews, and how I managed declaring my abstention from the substance in interview encounters, see Chapter 4 Methodology, Reflexivity section (pg. 100).

8.4.5 Summary of Methodological Evaluations

In summary, the methodology used in this thesis was successful in answering the research question of how do magic mushroom users construct meaning of use and in achieving the research aims of exploring specific conceptions of magic mushroom experiences drawn from the research literature. In spite of this success there are limitations to the sample obtained and the use of interview methodology. The sample obtained is limited by geographical scope and ethnic homogeneity. Interview methods were limited by a lack of situation of accounts of mushroom use in social and cultural contexts. A more comprehensive recruitment strategy making better use of online resources, and supplementation of interviews with naturalistic or ethnographic data could strengthen the data obtained in this study and are considerations for further research. Having evaluated the methodology undertaken in the present thesis, I shall now discuss and reflect upon theoretical considerations.

8.5 Theoretical Evaluations

The social constructionist orientation of this thesis was successful in enabling the exploration of how meaning is constructed of magic mushrooms and in the consideration of the use of available discourses by participants in their accounts. This research is validated by the accounts of participants, who used multiple and competing discourses to construct their experiences in a variety of flexible (but finite) ways. This reaffirms the argument that socio-cultural factors and discourses shape the meanings made of magic mushroom experiences, beyond the function of psychopharmacological action alone (Langlitz 2012, Letcher 2007). It is important to note that the

epistemological focus of this thesis was not upon experiences themselves but on how people account for experiences they have had with magic mushrooms, using available discourses from the socio-cultural context. It was not denied that people do have ostensibly ‘real’ subjective experiences with psilocybin mushrooms on account of their being a psychoactive substance (Roberts 2008). As such, this thesis does not represent socio-cultural determinism (Langlitz 2012), but it does shift epistemological focus to the role of social and cultural factors in how people make sense of their experiences

Considering the theorisation of magic mushroom experiences in (broadly) academic research it is evident that the field is incredibly diverse. There are numerous methods and disciplines (I identified five in the literature review) with incumbent theoretical and epistemological orientations to what magic mushrooms do, what they are, and what they are for; ranging from ‘psychopharmacological realism’ to neo-shamanic revelation. Each of these disparate disciplines and theoretical orientations are largely separate; they do not communicate across theoretical divides (between, for example, auto-ethnographic neo-shamanism and materialist psychopharmacology) and there is no coherence in the academic theorisation of psilocybin mushrooms and experiences. This disparateness reflects and is reflected by the discursive terrain that users’ negotiate and the data of this study reflects this breadth of conceptualisations. By engaging with magic mushroom users it has been possible to explore how these typically unrelated discourses (which are utilised within, and in some instances produced by, academic disciplines) are negotiated, combined, and related to experiences in the social world. For example, how ‘parallel-reality’ and ‘psychological discourses’ are negotiated, combined and bypassed.

Whilst this integration in peoples accounting is possible, I would argue that theoretical integration of this kind is not possible. There is too great a distance between certain discourses which constitute the reality of magic mushroom experiences for integration to be possible; psychological and neo-shamanic conceptualisations simply cannot be combined in research due to how radically outside of rational and scientific discourses supernatural and metaphysical neo-shamanism is. As such, calls to develop more integrated approach to researching psychedelics where the interaction of biological and socio-cultural factors can be explored in conjunction (Furst 1976, Langlitz 2010) are at best a pipe dream due to the diversity of discourses which constitute the meanings of mushrooms beyond the laboratory.

The theoretical orientation of this thesis included the use of a Foucauldian informed analysis (Parker 1992, Willig 2008) to explore the use of discourses in constructing meaning in participants talk. Whilst some theorists may question the extent to which this analysis ‘Foucauldian’ (Hook 2007), I have argued that it is within the remit of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis in social psychology (see Chapter 4 Methodology). A traditional genealogy was not conducted but the

historical overview of mushroom use in the West presented in Chapter 1, and the extensive review of available research literatures in Chapter 2, locate the discourses I identified in analysis in historical, social and political contexts. The theoretical and analytic focus of this thesis upon the use of discourses to construct meaning in interactive talk means it may be better to consider this thesis a Foucauldian informed ‘conjunctural analysis’ that sought to explore why and how particular discourses are utilised by participants in their accounts in the current social, political and cultural context (Hall & Jefferson 2006). Over all I argue that this thesis has been successful in using a Foucauldian informed analysis, flexibly applying post structural conceptions of power, truth, and the action of discourses to permit, inhibit and resist certain accounts (Hall 1997, Yates & Hiles 2011).

In summary, it is important to appreciate how large a departure from the dominance of ‘psychopharmacological realism’ it is to conduct social constructionist research into people’s meaning making of a psychedelic substance. This thesis has produced a Foucauldian informed social constructionist account of the ways in which people account for their use of and experiences with magic mushrooms, demonstrating how certain discourses act as ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 1980) which serve to marginalise other constructions. The theoretical orientation of this thesis sought to transcend the typical epistemological focus upon biology, set and setting, and to expand analysis to consider the situated cultural and social factors which influence the meaning making of mushroom experiences (Langlitz 2010). Further psychedelics research in all disciplines would benefit from a greater consideration of the role of the socio-cultural in what makes psychedelic substances meaningful to those that use them.

8.6 Further Contributions to Research

The current thesis adds to the sparse empirical research conducted with people who use magic mushrooms from their own perspective. This is particularly timely following recent media interest in the resumption of psilocybin laboratory studies, and due to the paucity of empirical studies of the possible meanings of magic mushrooms since the change in their legal status in 2005. This research also adds to literature exploring the implications of neo-liberalism for how people make sense of their use of and experiences with drugs, furthering work of this kind in the sub-field of psychedelic substances.

This thesis also has broader implications beyond the field of psychedelic and critical drug research. The concept ‘Celebrating Uncertainty’ (Chapter 5, pg. 133-136) formulated in this thesis has potential implications for critical social psychologists, as it demonstrates a way in which people can circumvent discursive dichotomies or take two seemingly contradictory positions simultaneously. This concept could therefore be useful to other areas of research where seemingly

dichotomous construction or either/or discursive negotiation is apparent, and where participants side-step dichotomy.

Additional broader implications of this research can be drawn from the various discourses used to legitimise magic mushroom use, such as the ‘Discourse of Naturalness’ (Chapter 6, pg. 138-147) and ‘Neo-spiritual Discourse’ (Chapter 7, pg. 171-177). The discursive construction of potentially criminal or socially unacceptable behaviour (e.g. taking magic mushrooms) as ‘natural’ or as an act of personal self-improvement could be a strategy employed in other areas. Further research could explore the social construction of legitimisation in other contexts by drawing upon the findings of the current thesis.

A major contribution is that this thesis broadens the theoretical perspective of psychedelic drug use literature to move beyond a frame work of ‘set and setting’ and possible psychopharmacological effects. My research invites consideration of drug use and experiences in a wider political, ideological and discursive context and the possible implications of this for how drug consumption is made meaningful. The social constructionist approach undertaken in this thesis seeks to avoid issues of mind body dualism and questions about what constitutes the reality of experiences (e.g. are entities hallucinations or are they exogenously ‘real’) and instead addresses how these constructions are deployed in the construction of meaning by those that consume the substance. It also serves to illustrate that the constitution and representation of experiences with psychedelic substances (in this case psilocybin mushrooms) is not solely a product of their psychopharmacological action. There is nothing ‘in mushrooms’ which leads people to construct them as psychopharmacological or neo-shamanic in nature, and when exploring the meanings made of psychedelic drugs researches should also look to the wider socio-cultural context.

8.7 Conclusion

In conclusion the meanings of psilocybin ‘magic’ mushrooms are constructed by users through a diverse range of seemingly contradictory discourses, which they mobilise, negotiate and modify in order to make sense of magic mushrooms and the experiences which they can occasion. Social, cultural and historically situated factors beyond the psychopharmacological action of psilocybin are instrumental in the way meaning is made of magic mushrooms in the social world. What magic mushrooms do, what they are and what they are for are conceptualised and understood through understandings of them as ‘*just drugs*’, as ‘*distinct drugs*’ and as ‘*neo-shamanic sacraments*’. The relationship of the meanings of magic mushrooms to the dominant neo-liberal order is a complicated one. Whilst many understandings align with the neo-liberal project and collective radical-political constructions of mushroom use are marginalised, they are not entirely extinguished.

Magic mushrooms are constructed by users as still having the potential, albeit at a more individualised level, to challenge contemporary consensus understandings. Furthermore, the practice of taking psychedelics keeps discourses which are profoundly unsettling to science alive. It challenges the claims of individualised psychopharmacological constructions of the person as a 'neurological subject' (Pitts-Taylor 2010) as well as the scientific materialist 'regime of truth' (Letcher 2007). Whilst magic mushrooms may be predominately constituted as drugs, psychological agents and through discourses in keeping with the neo-liberal agenda, there is still the active (though marginal) discursive space for users to conceptualise mushroom experiences as counter-cultural, to keep the 'magic' in magic mushrooms and to continue to 'appease the mushroom gods'.

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Appendix 1: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Flyer (display size A5)

MAGIC MUSHROOM **RESEARCH PROJECT**

I am currently looking for participants for a PhD research project at the University of Bath.

The project involves an interview asking you about your experiences with magic (psilocybin) mushrooms.

Any information you provide will be kept confidential, and your anonymity is assured.

If you are aged 18 or older, have taken magic mushrooms and have any questions or are interested in taking part, please email me:

J.M.Thompson@bath.ac.uk

Or call to leave a message at:

01225 38 4219

Thank you!



Online Advertisement:

A study exploring peoples experiences with magic (psilocybin) mushrooms

James Thompson, a PhD researcher in the Department of Psychology, is looking for participants for a study exploring people's experiences with magic (psilocybin) mushrooms.

James is looking for people aged 18 and over who have consumed magic mushrooms a minimum of twice in their life time.

This study involves taking part in an interview of about an hour in length, and can be conducted in person, on the telephone or via Skype depending upon your preferences.

Anonymity is assured for participants; your name and any details that might identify you will be omitted or changed. This research has been approved by the Department of Psychology Ethics Committee.

If you'd like to know more about this study, or are interested in taking part please contact James Thompson either via email:

J.M.Thompson@bath.ac.uk

Or call to leave a message at:

01225 38 4219

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



Hello

My name is James Thompson and I am conducting my PhD at the University of Bath in social psychology.

I am conducting a study exploring magic mushroom use from the perspective of people who use them. I am particularly interested in people's personal experiences with psilocybin mushrooms. The focus of my study is on people's experiences with magic mushrooms and what this experience means to them; this research is not linked to government policy or value judgements about mushroom taking.

The research will involve taking part in an interview around a loose set of questions but with plenty of opportunity for discussion: more like a conversation than a spoken survey. I aim for each interview to be about an hour in length but that depends very much on how much people want to say. Interviews can be conducted in person at a time and place of your choosing, or on the telephone/through Skype depending on what you would prefer. Interviews will be digitally audio recorded.

Your full anonymity is assured. I will change all names at the point of typing interviews into transcripts, and any other details at all that might identify you will be omitted or changed to protect your identity. Any references to other people's names and the names of specific locations will be changed. Once I've transcribed the interview the original recording will be kept locked away and then deleted.

You have a right to withdraw at any time if you change your mind about participating. Even after the study is completed your data can be omitted and destroyed (provided it is before the submission of the thesis).

If you'd like to arrange a time to meet with me my email address is:

J.M.Thompson@bath.ac.uk

Or call to leave a message at:

01225 38 4219

I look forward to hearing from you!

Many thanks

James Thompson

Appendix 3: Participant List

This list is intended as a quick reference guide to associate participant pseudonym and number with the more detailed demographic information found in Chapter 4 Methodology.

Participant number is assigned in the chronological order in which interviews took place.

Number	Pseudonym	Age	Mushroom Use	Interview Modality
1	Alan	45	All Varieties	
2	Bill	30	Picked- Indigenous	
3	Alice	27	Picked- Indigenous	
4	Colin	31	Picked- Indigenous	
5	Sam	30	Picked- Indigenous	
6	Simon	60	All Varieties	
7	Julie	46	Picked- Indigenous Purchased (Thailand)	Skype
8	Greg	24	Picked – Indigenous Purchased- Cultivated- Amsterdam	Skype
9	Randy	25	Purchased (Thailand)	
10	Victor	30	Purchased- Cultivated And Indigenous Strains	
11	Olivia	33	Purchased (South America)	
12	Evan	37	Picked–Indigenous	Telephone
13	Will	32	Picked–Indigenous	
14	Andrea	28	Purchased –Amsterdam- Mushrooms & Truffles	Telephone
15	Wendy	30	All Varieties	
16	Dominic	19	Purchased- Amsterdam- Truffles	
17	Erica	23	Purchased- Cultivated	
18	Maud	51	Picked- Indigenous	
19	Owen	25	All Varieties	
20	Tim	24	All Varieties	Telephone
21	Mark	56	Picked- Indigenous	
22	Karl	21	Purchased- Amsterdam- Truffles	
23	Frank	30	All Varieties	

Picked- Indigenous varieties refer to *Psilocybe Semilanceata* or ‘Liberty Caps’ which grow in the UK.

Cultivated refers to strains of *Psilocybe Cubensis* grown for sale legally and illegally.

Truffles- psilocybin rich sclerotia legally on sale in the Netherlands

Countries in brackets have indigenous *Psilocybe* mushrooms but they are a scheduled substance. ‘All varieties’ implies participants’ have picked and purchased indigenous and cultivated varieties of mushrooms both legally and illegally.

Appendix 4: Consent Form

Side 1

Magic Mushroom Study: Consent Form

The purpose of this interview is as part of a PhD research project exploring people's experiences with magic mushrooms. Interviews will be transcribed and used as data in a written format. The original recordings will be taken in a digital format, archived, and stored securely until transcription, after which they will be deleted. At the point of transcription your interview will be anonymised; your real name will not be used to identify you at any point (a pseudonym will be used instead), and any other details that may identify you to a third party will be removed or changed to protect your identity. You have a right to withdraw your participation at any point during the interview and subsequently for 8 months from the interview date. After that period it might not be possible to withdraw your participation due to submission of the thesis.

Any information that you provide will be treated confidentially, and information that forms part of the research project will be kept anonymous.

If you feel affected by any of the issues that may arise throughout the course of the interview, details of organisations that can provide help and support will be provided by the researcher.

By signing this form you give full and informed consent to participate in this study and understand the terms described above.

Signed: _____

Date: / / _____

Help and support:

FRANK (formerly the National Drugs Help Line)- a national organisation that offers advice, counselling and support via telephone and email contact , as well as listing local support services available to people.

Website: **www.talktofrank.com**

Telephone: (Freephone): **0800 77 66 00 (24hour service)**

Drugline: a charity offering advice, support and counselling on drug related issues.

Website: **www.drugline.org**

Telephone: (Freephone) **0808 1 606 606**

NHS Direct: a health information service provided by the NHS. Can provide information on local NHS support services and mental health support.

Website: **www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk**

Telephone: **0845 46 47**

Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Introduction:

Explain my interest in people's use of magic mushrooms because of interest in the nature of the experience and what people think of it/feel about it. The research is to understand what tripping from magic mushrooms is like and how they make sense of their experience, from the point of view of people who take mushrooms.

Questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about you and magic mushrooms? How did you encounter them?
2. What is it about mushrooms specifically that appeals to you?
3. Can you tell me a bit about a key or significant experience/experiences you have had with magic mushrooms? (Best trip, last time you did them, etc.)
4. What did you think about that experience at the time/now?

Topics to cover through unscripted prompts (or questions to ask after the initial four, to be deployed sensitively and non-judgementally to avoid presaging possible responses):

Sense making-

- Entheogenic understandings- spiritual or mystical components of the magic mushroom experience, where do you locate it, have you had any?
- Animism- where do you locate any potential animistic experiences, real, psychological, etc. Have you had any?
- Hedonism- are magic mushrooms a party drug?
- Psychological understandings- idea mushrooms can be used to 'play with your head'. A possible psychological attribution of that which is experienced? What do you think about this?

Appendix 6: Example Transcription & Key

Transcription Notation

INT: Interviewer

, Standard breath pause when speaking (less than 0.5 seconds) indicated by a comma

(.) Pauses of 1-2 seconds

(..) Pauses of 2 to 4 seconds

(Laughs) Indicates laughter:

[] Paralinguistic sounds (e.g. false accents) or actions (e.g. gestures) used to communicate meaning, for example: [Gestures around the room].

Example:

***EVAN:** I think there's very much a spiritual mystery surrounding um (.) the fact that they exist, and there they grow and you can go and pick them, and you know they are going to do um, wondrous things, and you know it would be very very different to, you know, having a blackberry (laughs) but still they both grow there*

***INT:** yeah that makes sense*

***EVAN:** and I think it's the nature of any experience that takes you beyond where you are um and that to me is all that is meant by spiritual um (..) so yes*

Pg. 19, 792-798 [Telephone] [Participant 12]

